

Related Working Definitions

The below sexual health and sexuality working definitions were developed as a result of a WHO-convened international technical consultation on sexual health in January 2002, and subsequently revised by a group of experts from different parts of the world. For a downloadable online version of the complete document entitled: *Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health*,¹ please see:

http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/gender_rights/defining_sexual_health.pdf

Working Definitions:²

□ Sex

Sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male. While these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, they tend to differentiate humans as males and females. *In general use in many languages, the term sex is often used to mean “sexual activity”, but for technical purposes in the context of sexuality and sexual health discussions, the above definition is preferred.*

□ Sexuality

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.

□ Sexual health

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.

□ Sexual rights

Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus statements. They include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to:

- the highest attainable standard of sexual health, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services;
- seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality;
- sexuality education;
- respect for bodily integrity;
- choose their partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;
- consensual marriage;
- decide whether or not, and when, to have children; and
- pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

The responsible exercise of human rights requires that all persons respect the rights of others.

¹ *Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2002. p5.

² These working definitions were developed through a consultative process with international experts beginning with the Technical Consultation on Sexual Health in January, 2002. They reflect an evolving understanding of the concepts and build on international consensus documents such as the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action. These working definitions are offered as a contribution to advancing understanding in the field of sexual health. They do not represent an official position of WHO.

