

Médecins du Monde International Position on Safe Abortion Rights

The Global Impact of Unsafe Abortion

Every year, unsafe abortion is a leading cause of maternal death worldwide:

- **39,000 women and girls, transgender men, and non-binary people die** from unsafe abortions.
- **7 million people** are hospitalised in developing countries due to complications.

Out of the **121 million unwanted pregnancies globally each year**, 60% end in abortion, with 45% occurring under unsafe conditions causing the death of 39,000 persons each year. These preventable deaths and injuries resulting from unsafe abortion highlight the critical need for safe and legal abortion care.

The lack of access to safe and legal abortion is an **avoidable public health emergency**. While more than 60 countries and territories have liberalised their abortion laws during the past 30 years globally, more than **40% of women still live in countries where abortion upon request is illegal**. Restricting access does not reduce the number of abortions; it only increases the likelihood of unsafe procedures.

Criminalising abortion disproportionately harms marginalised groups, such as women and girls in poverty, sexual minorities and migrants. Privileged individuals can often circumvent restrictive laws, while people who are already marginalised due to multiple and intersecting factors (poverty, migration, lack of formal education, etc.) are often forced to resort to unsafe alternatives. Conversely, bodily autonomy and the right to self-determination are central to gender equality, influencing social, political, and economic opportunities...

Safe abortion guarantees fundamental rights

Access to abortion services is a core component of **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)**.¹ Limited access to safe abortion increases maternal deaths and harms

¹ SRHR is one of MdM's core areas of intervention and expertise. It is an inclusive concept that integrates health services with the right to make decisions about sexuality and reproduction.

SRHR encompasses:

- The right to freely make decisions about sexuality and reproduction without coercion, discrimination, persuasion or violence.
- The right to lead a safe, pleasurable, and freely chosen sex life.

public health. A holistic approach should focus on preventing unplanned pregnancies and ensuring safe, accessible abortion when needed.

Restricting abortion undermines human rights

At the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) international bodies urged governments to decriminalise abortion and ensure safe and legal abortion services. Numerous treaties² and international bodies protect the right to bodily autonomy, including the right to make one's own decisions concerning their body, the right to life³ and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.⁴

In consequence, restrictions on abortion undermine numerous internationally protected rights, including the rights to life, health, equality, privacy, bodily autonomy, and integrity.

Abortion is essential to achieving social and gender equalities

Access to safe abortion is important for overcoming social and gender inequalities. It provides pregnant individuals with the possibility for self-determination. Free access to abortion services is especially relevant for those facing poverty, discrimination because of their gender identity or migration barriers.⁵

Safe abortion is part of essential healthcare

Abortion as medical necessity

Safe abortion is a lifesaving medical procedure that protects individuals from life-threatening complications of unsafe or unregulated terminations. It is a critical aspect of healthcare, ensuring the physical and mental well-being of those facing medical emergencies or unviable pregnancies. The WHO Abortion Care Guidelines (2022) recognise the medical necessity of providing safe abortion care and provide technical guidance.

-
- The right to access comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services provided by supportive professionals and other competent health players.

² Reference texts: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

³ Pacte international relatif aux droits civils et politiques

⁴ international Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

⁵ We refer here to the notion of reproductive justice, which is defined by Loretta J. Ross as a positive strategy that links sexuality, health, and human rights with social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in a broader context of the well-being and health of women, families, and communities.

Ross, L. (2006). What is reproductive justice ? Sisterson Reproductive Justice Collective.

MdM's Call to Action

Through its programmes, MdM witnesses daily the severe health consequences of restricted access to safe abortion services. MdM calls on decision-makers and healthcare providers to ensure unrestricted access to safe abortion care through the following actions:

- 1. Recognise abortion as essential healthcare**

Decision-makers need to recognise that access to safe abortion is imperative to respecting fundamental human rights, including the right to health. Together with healthcare providers they must ensure free and unconditional access to safe abortion services since it is part of essential healthcare.

- 2. Ensure Comprehensive Access to Quality Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

Ensure full access to quality SRHR services, including maternal care, family planning, education, and safe abortion. This holistic approach prevents unplanned pregnancies and provides access to safe abortion care when needed.

- 3. Removal of all legal barriers and regulations**

Restrictive laws and regulations that limit access lead to the deaths and injuries of thousands of people in need of abortion services. We call on decision makers to fully decriminalise abortion services and remove all regulations limiting the access to safe abortion services such as waiting periods.

- 4. Ensure equal access**

Decision makers and healthcare providers need to ensure equitable access for all population groups, including those facing poverty, discrimination because of their gender identity or migration barriers. This includes promoting self-managed medical abortion.

By addressing these issues, Médecins du Monde advocates for a world where safe abortion is universally accessible, affirming health, equality, and autonomy as non-negotiable human rights.