



Campaign Statement in Celebration of International Safe Abortion Day: 28 September 2016

The first international day dedicated to the decriminalisation of abortion was in 1990, initiated by the feminist movement at a regional conference in Argentina. The choice of date was inspired by the abolition of slavery for children born to slave mothers in Brazil in 1871, when it was named the Day of the Free Womb. Slavery can be imposed by one set of human beings on another in a myriad of ways. In the face of the threat of slavery and other forms of coercion, the achievement of freedom, both freedom from and freedom to, is a constant and unending struggle, including for women.

Most women have children. To force women to have children they do not wish to have, however, is a form of slavery and of violence against women. There are only two ways women can avoid unwanted pregnancy. The first is not to have sex with men, thereby removing the risk of pregnancy. But, of course, not every sexual encounter is consensual. Historically, women have collectively declared a [boycott of sex](#) in a number of countries, for a range of political reasons, sometimes effectively. A boycott of sex has not yet been used to demand universal access to safe abortion, but it is always possible. It might be assumed that, given the choice, most heterosexual men would support access to safe contraception and abortion over the refusal of sex, especially in the longer term although this is an untested assumption.

The only other way women can avoid unwanted pregnancy is through universal access to safe, effective contraception and safe, legal abortion. Contraception is not enough on its own because it comes with a failure rate and it isn't always used or there to be used. That makes access to safe abortion a necessity.

[World Contraception Day](#), first launched in 2007, is being celebrated today, 26 September. The Campaign office is supporting this day today through social media, using the hashtags [#WCDChat](#) and [#WCD2016](#).

International Safe Abortion Day is being celebrated in the week surrounding 28 September. It is probably a coincidence that these two international days are so close to each other, but it is surely appropriate.

On 17 August this year, with the support of signatories from 73 countries who are actively involved in policymaking, health services, research, human rights and advocacy in support of safe abortion, the Campaign [asked the UN Secretary-General and the heads of UN agencies \(+ Español\)](#) to take a stand and make 28 September an official UN Day. We asked them to acknowledge that making abortion safe is in line with a growing number of inter-governmental agreements, starting with the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action in 1994, the Beijing Women's Conference Platform for Action in 1995, the Latin American Convención de Belém do Pará in 1996, the African Maputo Protocol of 2005, and most recently the call for the decriminalisation of abortion across Africa by the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

This year, for 28 September, inspired by ACHPR, we are calling for the decriminalisation of abortion across the world. We are asking that abortion is no longer treated as a crime under laws passed in the 19th century by colonial powers. Inspired by Laurence Rossignol, the French Minister for Families, Children and Women's Rights in a speech at the UN last year, we are calling for a moratorium on prosecutions of women who have had abortions and safe abortion providers.

And we are calling for universal access to safe abortion.

We say: "Abortion is not a crime!"

If it is legitimate to use contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy then it is legitimate to have an abortion for the same reason. Abortion must be removed from the criminal law as an essential step towards making it safe. It is in the power of all governments to do this and to make safe abortion accessible and available to every woman who requests it, thereby eliminating unsafe abortion. In recent decades, every United Nations human rights body has recommended that governments take these steps. And indeed, in recent years, a growing number of governments in countries where abortion is legally restricted have acknowledged the extent of unsafe abortion in their countries and the serious consequences for women and their families. Research has shown how high the costs are to their public health systems for treating complications of unsafe abortion, which would disappear if they were providing safe abortions. Research has also found that adolescents are most at risk, including those who became pregnant due to sexual abuse. This is the case in Africa, parts of Asia and in Latin America today.

We call for decriminalisation of abortion around the world

Yet as soon as a government takes steps to alleviate this situation through proposals for law reform, even minimal ones that will affect only a small number of women, or proposes guidelines for implementing their current laws less restrictively, a brigade of conservative religious and others comes on the scene and seeks to block change. The pressure behind the scenes is often enormous. Governments become timid, forget their national, regional and international commitments to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, among which deaths and injury from unsafe abortion constitute either a first or second cause, and go silent. The most egregious example early this year was in Sierra Leone, where in spite of not one but two votes in favour of law change in the national parliament, the second vote being unanimously in favour, the president has for the past nine months refused to sign the Safe Abortion Act into law, creating an unresolved constitutional crisis.

Mozambique, where the abortion law was reformed between 2014 and 2015, is a notable exception – where government, legal experts, health professionals and NGOs worked together to implement change. We call on governments to follow in the footsteps of countries like Mozambique and Uruguay, where a harm reduction model was used to reform the law and make abortions safe.

In contrast, this year has seen a bill in the parliament of El Salvador to increase the number of years of prison for abortion, and last week in Poland a bill was sent to a parliamentary committee that would not only ban all abortions, even if the woman's life is at risk, but also antenatal screening and sexuality education.

The anti-abortion movement has changed a great deal over the past decades. From a movement that used to try and convince everyone that abortion was wrong, they have morphed into a group who want to convince people that a fertilised egg has more value and more right to protection than a living person. They talk about vulnerability, but they never call for nor put their considerable energy or resources into improving the lives of living children, millions of whom have very precarious lives and are very vulnerable indeed. Moreover, they completely discount women's deaths and suffering from unsafe abortion. Nonetheless, in spite of decades of

trying, they have failed to convince anyone that making abortion illegal will stop abortion. They have particularly failed to convince women to stop having abortions, the very same women who would do anything to nurture and protect the children they do have. Even women who think abortion is wrong have abortions, including women in the anti-abortion movement.

Pregnancy happens in women's bodies, not in the disembodied womb they portray. They appear not to care about the deaths of women from unsafe abortions, which inevitably lead to the deaths of fertilised eggs, embryos and fetuses as well. Their language often reads like a declaration of holy war against women. Their slogans, calling for protection of the so-called "unborn", are actually a call to force women to become mothers at the whim of their own biology. Taken to the extreme, using the analogy of oak trees and acorns, they would enforce the planting of every acorn that falls from the tree, even if the thousands of trees that would result would choke and kill the mother tree. How do they seek to achieve their aims? They work for the criminalisation of women who have had abortions, that is, to make up to one in three women in the world a criminal. And they imprison women who are poor and have no recourse to private doctors or legal advice. They reserve particular hatred for those who help women to have safe abortions – murdering them or destroying clinics in the USA, for example, or putting them through years of unwarranted prosecution, as with Dr Carlos Morin in Spain.

It's time for a moratorium on prosecutions for abortion!

But things have also gone further. We are beginning to see support for the criminalisation of women who have had a miscarriage or a stillbirth, that is, any pregnancy that does not result in a living child. This is an appalling new form of blame. The imprisonment of women for these reasons in El Salvador is well known, but this is also taking place in the USA, and there was a case in England at the end of last year as well. In Northern Ireland, it is apparently well known that hospitals are reporting instances of miscarriage for investigation. Elsewhere, women are being demonised who have died after unsafe abortions. In Brazil, for example, the body of Caroline, a 29-year-old woman who died from an unsafe abortion, was dumped in the street not long ago in a city near Rio de Janeiro. Commenting on press reports of her death, anti-abortionists have said she deserved it. This reveals an incredible hatred of women, and seeks to dehumanise all of us by association.

The anti-abortion goal – of taking away any autonomy from women over our bodies and reproductive lives – will not be defeated by rational, public health, ethical, evidence-based or human rights-based argument alone, no matter how eloquent it is. It is, however, essential in building a critical mass of support, until governments can no longer look the other way.

Our movements worldwide have achieved widespread support for women's right to decide the number and spacing of their children, countries where abortion is legally restricted are dragging their feet or even trying to take us backwards, e.g. when right-wing parties have taken control of government. History has shown that change which benefits women comes excruciatingly slowly. In the end, it is about power, at the individual as well as the social level. Women will have abortions; the real issue is whether those who seek to help them or those who seek to hurt them have more power to affect their experience and whether they survive it.

We are an international movement supporting universal access to safe abortion

Movements to support access to safe, effective contraception began more than 100 years ago; they are large and growing, and in recent years, extremely well-funded. Contraceptive use has grown substantially, though more in the global north, where the rate of abortions has been falling apace. In the global south, however, the use of contraception has not yet risen to the point where the rate of abortions has begun falling, especially in the least developed countries. This is because women's status and freedom to take charge of and control many aspects of their lives, including having the right to decide the number and spacing of their children, remains far more restricted. Hence, with the global growth in population, the numbers of abortions have

continued to rise; at last estimate (for 2014) they had reached 56.3 million abortions per year. This is the ultimate failure of the anti-abortion movement, but the fact that half of those abortions remain unsafe also represents a failure of the abortion rights movement to convince our governments to act.

Movements for abortion rights also began 100 years ago. Many countries reformed their laws on abortion, starting with the Soviet Union in the 1920s and later the then Soviet bloc of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In the second half of the 20th century, most European countries, the USA and Canada, Cuba, India, some states in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and others also began to reform their laws.

The abortion rights movement is fighting for protection of the health and rights of women, and women's right to decide what happens in their own bodies, so that whether a woman wants to be pregnant and have a child, or she feels she cannot continue a pregnancy, she can do so safely in both cases.

Many of us have been engaged in this struggle throughout our lives, as have countless others who came before us. All over the world, for 28 September, we are declaring with one voice that in law and policy and in service delivery, and as a matter of human rights and public health, women have a right to safe abortion.

We will continue this struggle until we have achieved this goal.