“Unsafe abortion is still killing tens of thousands women around the world” – UN rights experts warn


GENEVA (27 September 2016) – Speaking ahead of the Global Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, a group of United Nations human rights experts* called on States across the world to repeal restrictive abortion laws and policies, and all punitive measures and discriminatory barriers to access safe reproductive health services.

The experts also expressed their support for the call of several non-governmental organisations to make 28 September an official UN day for safe abortion worldwide, to urge Governments to decriminalise abortion and provide reproductive health services in a legal, safe and affordable manner.

"In the twenty-first century unsafe abortion is one of the leading causes of maternal mortality and morbidity. According to the World Health Organization, about 22 million unsafe abortions take place each year worldwide and an estimated 47,000 women die annually from complications resulting from the resort to unsafe practices for termination of pregnancy.

Criminalisation of abortion and failure to provide adequate access to services for termination of an unwanted pregnancy are forms of discrimination based on sex. Restrictive legislation which denies access to safe abortion is one of most damaging ways of instrumentalising women’s bodies and a grave violation of women’s human rights. The consequences for women are severe, with women sometimes paying with their lives.

Restrictive laws apply to 40% of world’s population. In countries which prohibit abortion, women who seek health services in relation to the termination of a pregnancy, whether in order to carry out the termination or to seek medical care after a miscarriage, may be subjected to prosecution and imprisonment. Prohibition does not reduce the need and the number of abortions; it merely increases the risks to the health and life of women and girls who resort to unsafe and illegal services.

Evidence-based comprehensive sex education and the availability of effective contraception are essential to lower the incidence of unintended pregnancy, and hence to lower the number of abortions. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that countries where access to information and to modern methods of contraception is easily available and where abortion is legal, have the lowest rates of abortion. The possibility of accessing safe abortion remains essential. Unwanted pregnancies cannot be totally prevented since no contraceptive method is 100% effective, and women may be exposed to sexual violence.

We recommend the good practice found in many countries which provide women’s access to safe abortion services, on request during the first trimester of pregnancy. We insist on international legal requirements that women can access abortion at the very least in cases of risk to their life or health, including mental health, rape, incest and fatal impairment of the foetus during the first trimester and later. In this context, states should also allow pregnant girls and adolescents to terminate unwanted pregnancies, which if carried to term expose them to a greatly increased risk to life and health, including a very high probability of suffering from obstetric fistula, prevent completion of their education and obstruct development of their economic and social capabilities.

We urge States to repeal restrictive laws and policies in relation to abortion, which do not meet the international human rights law requirements and that have discriminatory and public health impacts, and to eliminate all punitive measures and discriminatory barriers to access safe reproductive health services. These laws and policies violate women’s human right to health and negate their autonomy in decision-making about their own bodies.
We cannot tolerate the severe violation of women’s human rights on the basis of their sex and biological differences. We cannot tolerate the high incidence of women’s and girls’ preventable deaths resulting from maternity-related issues, including from unsafe abortion.

The Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion

In the past 30 years, women’s rights groups have mobilized on 28 September, named ‘the Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion’, to urge their Governments to decriminalise the termination of pregnancy, end the stigma and discrimination around the practice and provide such services in a legal, safe and affordable manner.

Originally from Latin America and the Caribbean, 28 September, which commemorates the abolition of slavery for children born to slave mothers in Brazil, was renamed as the day of the ‘free womb’ and the movement spread to all the other regions in the world.

While slavery has now been abolished, there is still a long way to go before the bodies and wombs of women around the world will stop being instrumentalised in the name of patriarchal morals or traditions and for political, economic or cultural purposes.

We join our voices to the strong and brave ones of many non-governmental organizations which have called for safe abortion worldwide by requesting that 28 September be made an UN official international day on safe abortion.”

* The UN EXPERTS: Alda Facio, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice; Dainius Pūras, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; and Juan E. Méndez, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

NOTE TO EDITORS:

Many international and regional human rights instruments have affirmed that ensuring women’s human rights requires access to safe and quality abortion and post-abortion services and care, including the CEDAW Convention, the Convención de Belém do Pará and the Maputo Protocol of 2005. The 2016 CESCR General Comment No. 22 also calls for guaranteeing women and girls access to safe abortion services and quality post-abortion care to prevent maternal mortality and morbidity.

For further information, please refer to the following documents:

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx)


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