

INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SAFE ABORTION

24 September 2019

OPEN LETTER to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Heads of UN agencies & national leaders

RE: International Safe Abortion Day, 28 September 2019

To:

Mr António Guterres, Secretary-General, United Nations, c/o dujarric@un.org

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Mr Luis Ernesto Pedernera Reyna, Chairperson, Committee on the Rights of the Child,
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cc: National Ministers of Health, Women's Affairs, and International Development in all UN
member states

Dear Secretary-General Guterres, international & national leaders,

We write to you as leaders of the United Nations and its agencies, and through our
members to national leaders, to invite you to make a public statement from your own
office/agency in support of International Safe Abortion Day, 28 September 2019. We also
ask that the United Nations makes it an official UN Day.

International Safe Abortion Day has been celebrated since 1990, initially in Latin America.
It was declared an international day in 2011. In 2012, events and activities took place in
some 50 countries, rising within a few years to 60-65 countries across all continents. A

growing number of national leaders and human rights bodies now recognise the day and speak out in support of its goals. Journalists are giving it more media space with every year that passes, drawing prominent national figures into the discussion.

The Campaign's nearly 1,400 members in 126 countries and our colleagues in many other international, regional, national and local organisations have become an international movement whose long-term goal is universal access to safe abortion as a public health and human rights issue. We believe motherhood should always be voluntary, never forced. This is a matter, above all, of gender equality and of women's autonomy over their own bodies and lives.

"Abortion is healthcare - #MyAbortionMyHealth" is the theme of International Safe Abortion Day in 2019. This theme is especially relevant because major international conferences in 2018-19 have health and healthcare as their central focus, from the Global Conference on Primary Care in October 2018, to the September 2019 conferences on Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals, and the International Conference on Population & Development in November 2019. "Leaving no one behind" is perhaps the most important slogan from all these conferences. We ask you to acknowledge in your statements that this applies to abortion as healthcare too.

In the past decade, CEDAW, the Committee against Torture, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Committee on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights have all called for abortion to be decriminalised and made safe.

The UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women in Law and Practice (now UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls) and the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women of the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights have made statements for 28 September each year since 2016. We ask all of you to join them and make a statement yourself in 2019.

In 2018, the UN Human Rights Committee published General Comment No. 36 on the right to life, Article 6, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (CCPR/C/GC/36). Paragraph 8 was about the right to life in relation to abortion, the first part of which says:

"Although States parties may adopt measures designed to regulate voluntary terminations of pregnancy, such measures must not result in violation of the right to life of a pregnant woman or girl, or her other rights under the Covenant. Thus, restrictions on the ability of women or girls to seek abortion must not, inter alia, jeopardize their lives, subject them to physical or mental pain or suffering which violates article 7, discriminate against them or arbitrarily interfere with their privacy. States parties must provide safe, legal and effective access to abortion where the life and health of the pregnant woman or girl is at risk, and where carrying a pregnancy to term would cause the pregnant woman or girl substantial pain or suffering, most notably where the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest or is not viable. In addition, States parties may not regulate pregnancy or abortion in all other cases in a manner that runs contrary to their duty to ensure that women and girls do not have to undertake unsafe abortions, and they should revise their abortion laws accordingly. For example, they should not take measures such as criminalizing pregnancies by unmarried women or apply criminal sanctions against women and girls undergoing abortion or against medical service providers assisting them in doing so, since taking such measures compel women and girls to resort to unsafe abortion..."

We call on you to make your voice heard and ensure that these measures are implemented by all States. We urge you to join together publicly to refuse to support the US President's call to governments at the UN conferences to condemn sexual and reproductive health and rights, safe abortion and comprehensive sexuality education.

The fact is that one in four pregnancies ends in an induced abortion worldwide. Abortion is one of the safest procedures in some countries. Yet half of all abortions internationally are still unsafe, causing complications, suffering and deaths that are almost all avoidable, making the need for concerted action urgent. Provision of post-abortion care in situations where abortion is legally restricted, the so-called “abortion compromise” of ICPD in 1994, has utterly failed to reduce the “serious public health problem of unsafe abortion”. Instead, resources that could be devoted to providing safe abortions to protect women’s health must be used to treat unsafe abortion complications among some 6.9 million adolescent girls and women each year.

We call on ICPD+25 to replace Paragraph 8.25 (ICPD Programme of Action 1994) with a commitment to universal access to safe abortion, leaving no one behind.

Lastly, we call on you, as national and international leaders whose work touches on girls’ and women’s health and related rights in so many ways, to send a strong signal to the international community and to governments, by publishing your statements of support for International Safe Abortion Day this year - and together making 28 September an official UN day.

Please send us your statements, so that we can share them:

info@safearbortionwomensright.org

With kindest regards,

Marge Berer

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