

# WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SAFE ABORTION IN THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

ADVANCING MATERNAL HEALTH, GENDER EQUALITY, AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS



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**2015** marks the start of a new development agenda that will build on progress made under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), an agenda created through intergovernmental negotiations and a global participatory process with inputs from civil society. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 renew governments' commitments under the MDGs to reduce maternal mortality; achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health information, education and services; ensure reproductive rights; and achieve gender equality as a matter of women's and girls' human rights. According to the Preamble: "As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind."<sup>1</sup>

Advancing women's access to safe and legal abortion is a priority for women's reproductive health and rights, in accordance with the new SDGs focused on health and gender equality. This briefing paper presents the SDG goals and targets whose achievement depends on safe and legal abortion and recommends minimum indicators for measuring global progress on abortion access.

## GOAL 3: ENSURE HEALTHY LIVES AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING FOR ALL AT ALL AGES

### TARGET 3.1: By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births.

The 2030 target calls for a two-thirds reduction in maternal mortality, based on the latest estimate for the maternal mortality ratio globally, at 210 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>2</sup> A report by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2013 highlighted unsafe abortion as a “leading cause of maternal deaths” and cautioned that “it is likely that the numbers of unsafe abortion will continue to increase unless women’s access to safe abortion and contraception – and support to empower women (including their freedom to decide whether and when to have a child) – are put in place and further strengthened.”<sup>3</sup>

While available data point to a decline globally in maternal deaths due to unsafe abortion, inequalities among regions, countries, and within countries continue to be pervasive, with women who are poor, young, or in other vulnerable circumstances suffering the most. Yet unsafe abortion is entirely preventable through ensuring women’s access to effective contraception together with safe and legal comprehensive abortion care — essential and cost-effective components of any strategy for reducing maternal mortality and achieving target 3.1.

Improved systems at the national level to record maternal deaths and identify their causes — including unsafe abortion—are required to improve measurement of progress toward this target and identify priority interventions.

### TARGET 3.7: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.

Access to safe, legal abortion has been recognized by the global community as an essential intervention in a package of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services that should be available to all women regardless of age, ethnicity, gender identity, geographic location, marital status, race, religion, socio-economic status or migration status.<sup>4</sup>

Adolescents in particular need universal access to youth-friendly and nonjudgmental sexual and reproductive health services that respect their sexual and reproductive health and rights and their rights to confidentiality, privacy and informed consent. In addition, adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence; interventions for adolescents therefore must include services to prevent and provide care to those affected by sexual violence, including access to emergency contraception and safe abortion.



### *Recommended indicator*

The proportion of health care facilities in a country that offer a minimum package of SRH services, with quality of care.<sup>5</sup> This indicator, supported by the global Partnership for Maternal Newborn and Child Health, should be in alignment with the WHO guidelines for evidence-based essential interventions, which include safe abortion and postabortion care at the primary level of the health system.<sup>6</sup>



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## GOAL 5: ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

**TARGET 5.6:** Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

**5.C:** Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Gender equality includes recognition of women's autonomy and capacity to make informed and independent decisions about their sexuality and reproduction through laws and policies allowing access to safe and legal abortion. Women's access to safe and legal abortion is as relevant to gender equality as women's equal access to education, employment, adequate food and housing.

International human rights bodies and experts<sup>7</sup> over the last 20 years have affirmed women's human rights to life and health when calling on countries to end unsafe abortion—and the resulting deaths and injuries—in places where abortion is a crime. No woman should be forced to continue a pregnancy against her will, or face life, health, or legal risks as a result of having an abortion. While it is encouraging that a number of countries have moved toward liberalization of abortion laws and policies since the Beijing Platform for Action called for review of punitive abortion laws two decades ago, too many countries have yet to do so. Restrictive laws discriminate against women by penalizing them for a health procedure only women need. Women who cannot access safe abortion services instead have clandestine, risky procedures and then avoid seeking treatment for complications due to stigma and fear of punishment in places where abortion is legally restricted.

In most countries, legalizing abortion is a precursor to being able to plan for and deliver high quality safe abortion services. It is no longer acceptable politically or morally for governments or international bodies to use arguments of culture or religion to avoid creating a supportive policy and legal framework for safe abortion that would lead to elimination of a major cause of maternal death and illness. To fulfill the 2030 agenda, governments and civil society must accelerate actions to repeal laws that criminalize women who seek abortion or who in other ways exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.<sup>8</sup>

### *Recommended indicators*

1. Changes in the legal indications for abortion in each country to establish that abortion is legal under broad grounds (at least health, life endangerment, rape, incest), coupled with governments' actions to review abortion

laws that discriminate against women by criminalizing abortion or in other ways creating barriers to a service that only women need.

2. Development, approval and dissemination by national/sub-national governments of guidelines for health facilities and other policy documents that are supportive of access to abortion care consistent with the latest WHO guidance.

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.
- 2 World Health Organization. Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990 to 2013 Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, The World Bank and the United Nations Population Division Executive Summary (2014) UN Doc WHO/RHR/14.13.
- 3 United Nations Economic and Social Council. Report of the Secretary-General on Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls (24 December 2013) UN Doc E/CN.6/2014/3.
- 4 The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health. A Global Review of the Key Interventions Related to Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (Rmnch). Geneva, Switzerland: PMNCH (2011).
- 5 The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health. Placing healthy women, children and adolescents at the heart of the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Indicator Framework. [http://www.who.int/pmnch/post2015\\_draft\\_indicator.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/pmnch/post2015_draft_indicator.pdf?ua=1)
- 6 The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health. A Global Review of the Key Interventions Related to Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (Rmnch). Geneva, Switzerland: PMNCH (2011); World Health Organization. Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems – 2nd ed. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO (2012).
- 7 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner. Information Series on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: Abortion. [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO\\_Abortion\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO_Abortion_WEB.pdf)
- 8 Diya Uberoi, Maria de Bruyn & Beatriz Galli (2012): Using human rights to address consequences of criminal laws on sexuality and reproductive autonomy, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, DOI:10.1080/13642987.2011.652366
- 9 Singh S, Maddow-Zimet I. Facility-based treatment for medical complications resulting from unsafe pregnancy termination in the developing world, 2012: a review of evidence from 26 countries. *BJOG* 2015; DOI: 10.1111/1471-0528.13552; World Health Organization. Unsafe abortion: global and regional estimates of the incidence of unsafe abortion and associated mortality in 2008 6th ed. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO (2011).
- 10 Center for Reproductive Rights. The World's Abortion Laws. New York: CRR (2014). <http://www.reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicactions.net/files/documents/AbortionMap2014.PDF>
- 11 Berer M. National laws and unsafe abortion: the parameters of change. *Reproductive Health Matters* 2004; 12: 1–8.

## SAFE AND LEGAL ABORTION: ESSENTIAL FACTS

- Worldwide, an estimated 22 million women obtain unsafe abortions every year, the vast majority in developing countries where abortion is restricted by law. As a result, almost seven million women seek treatment in health facilities, and 47,000 women die annually—making unsafe abortion one of the world's major preventable causes of maternal mortality.<sup>9</sup>
- Deaths and injuries due to unsafe abortion -- and prosecution for seeking illegal abortion -- disproportionately affect women who are young, poor, rural and lack education, as well as those who belong to a racial or ethnic minority or indigenous group.
- 25 percent of the world's women live in countries where abortion is still restricted to saving a woman's life or prohibited altogether, with a few of these countries granting limited other exceptions.<sup>10</sup>
- Laws that make abortion a crime do not reduce the incidence of abortion. Even worse, there is a proven correlation between countries' restrictive abortion laws and high rates of maternal deaths and injuries. The 82 countries with the most restrictive abortion laws also have the highest incidence of unsafe abortions.<sup>11</sup>

