



## IASSW WOMEN 'S INTEREST GROUP AND IASSW HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND ABORTION: A SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE

### **Abortion: A Human Rights Concern**

Access to a safe abortion has been declared an international human right on many platforms. The need for abortions to be safe and accessible was supported by various States at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994 and adopted by States in the Beijing Platform for Action, which was agreed at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. In compliance with these commitments, laws about human rights should ensure that people's decisions about their own body should be in their own control. Criminalizing abortion is discrimination against women, it stigmatizes people and in addition putting them at risk of increased reproductive health problems and at risk of death due to unsafe illegal abortions. Unsafe abortions can lead to physical and mental health complications, as well as social and financial burdens on individuals, communities, and health systems. In alignment with the right to life, health and bodily integrity, States have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfill women's rights to abortion services (OHCHR 2020). Denying access to health services including abortion, is discrimination and can constitute gender-based violence, torture and/or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (OHCHR 2020).

25 million unsafe abortions take place each year and the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that currently about 45% of all abortions are unsafe, resulting in maternal deaths and illnesses that could be prevented. WHO notes that "lack of access to safe, timely, affordable, and respectful abortion care is a critical public health and human rights problem and poses risks to women's physical and mental well-being throughout the life course" (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>) and are the third leading cause of maternal deaths worldwide and lead to an additional five million largely preventable disabilities (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/sexual-and-reproductive-rights/abortion-facts/>).

In recent years we have been confronted with varied and contradictory responses. On the one hand, more and more countries have legislated the right to safe abortion (for example Ireland in 2018), on the other hand, reproductive rights have been eroded in many other countries that had previously supported reproductive justice (for example in the USA, Poland etc.).

### **Social Work Perspective**

Social work educators *need to advocate for sexual health, reproductive rights and reproductive justice if they are to eliminate health and social inequalities*. Sexual and reproductive health services for women need to be fully accessible and funded. Social workers should support any and all people making decisions related to when, how and if to have a family and provide unbiased support, accurate information, and appropriate referrals to people's needs. When abortion is restricted or denied, it harms all people, and the consequences can be

catastrophic. People living with intersecting disadvantage are disproportionately impacted by access to safe and affordable abortions and denying abortion rights leaves many individuals and families trapped in intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage. Adverse consequences for these affected people include financial hardships, health complications, and other deleterious effects, such as the need to remain in an abusive relationship or poverty, which are likely to affect their child's well-being. Reproductive justice includes women's right to access various forms of reproductive rights (from access to gynecological clinics, reproductive education, free contraceptives, to the right to safe abortion).

Social workers need to understand *how to promote reproductive rights and reproductive justice at the individual and structural levels*. Social workers need to understand and challenge the stigma of abortion and the trauma that can be experienced when having to have a legal abortion, which is further complicated in situations where an illegal abortion is the only option.

Social work educators *need to address these issues when teaching social work and seeking transformative education, including sexual health, reproductive rights and reproductive justice*. They need to explore the difference between reproductive health and reproductive justice and pro-choice movements, including the barriers faced by social workers in promoting reproductive rights and reproductive justice.

Critical social work educators need to undertake and/or support research which responds to reproductive rights and reproductive justice, for example in challenging misinformation about abortion. It is imperative that social work educators address the misinformation that can present a significant barrier to safe, legal and quality reproductive care, and use evidence-based research to fight for reproductive justice.