



FEMICIDE DUE TO UNSAFE ABORTIONS

Introduction:

Unsafe abortion is a "procedure for terminating an unwanted pregnancy either by people lacking the necessary skills, or in an environment lacking minimal medical standards, or both"¹ and is one of the top five causes of maternal mortality.² Almost half of all pregnancies worldwide are unplanned and 60% of those end in abortion.³ 45% of all abortions are unsafe, and could lead to complications, including death, for the woman.⁴ In some cases, abortion is essential care, yet bans or lack of access lead to over 800 maternal deaths daily,⁵ which are preventable.⁶ In each case, deaths due to unsafe, poorly conducted, or clandestine abortions are seen as a form of indirect Femicide by the [Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences](#).⁷ Although it is mostly women who

are victims of the deadly consequences that unsafe abortions pose, the issue also impacts other pregnant persons and those who may become pregnant, and exacerbates the risks faced by young people and those with disabilities.⁸

Although the Covid-19 pandemic did not have significant health impacts on pregnant women, the policies instituted to help combat the pandemic did affect women seeking abortions in some places. When healthcare systems shifted to focusing on essential health care for patients only, and rescheduling elective care was recommended,⁹ many conservative elected officials "attempted to restrict access to abortion by deeming it to be nonessential."¹⁰ This can not only lead to deadly health complications for women who need abortions, but also can impact

AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO FEMICIDE

In 2021, the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) marked the 30th anniversary of the [Global 16 Days Campaign](#), with a special anniversary theme of [Ending Femicide](#), which is recognized under international law as the gender-related killing of women and girls. This year, the Campaign, along with its allies, is [continuing](#) its advocacy to end Femicide. Vulnerable women and girls face a heightened risk of Femicide that is associated with multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This fact sheet spotlights women who are killed due to Femicide as a result of unsafe abortions and recommends certain actions.

those who try to find other routes to terminate their pregnancies.

Heightened Vulnerabilities and Nuances:

Although some countries attempt to ban abortions, nationwide bans do not stop abortions, only safe abortions. Those who need to terminate their pregnancies will still do so but will be at more risk of complications and death. Most of these deaths due to abortion occur due to complications such as "severe hemorrhage, sepsis (severe general infection), poisoning, uterine perforation, or damage to other internal organs"¹¹ occur. In cases where women are able to access pills on the black market, "they may still suffer complications due to poor drug quality, incorrect dosing, inadequate information, or a combination of these factors."¹² If performed safely, these complications from abortions can be avoided and the woman saved.

In some cases, abortion is criminalized and both healthcare providers and patients are penalized to the extent that doctors are unwilling to perform them, even in cases where the life of the mother is in danger. For example, in cases of pregnancy where women develop complications like placental abruption (where the placenta separates from the uterus before birth),¹³ hyperemesis gravidarum (extreme and persistent nausea and vomiting that lasts throughout pregnancy),¹⁴ preeclampsia (rapid rise in blood pressure that can lead to seizure, stroke, multiple organ failure, and even death),¹⁵ or ectopic pregnancies (when a fertilized egg grows outside of the uterus),¹⁶ termination or may be the best course of treatment to save her.¹⁷ However, in places where doctors are legally not allowed to terminate the pregnancy, both the fetus and the

mother's life can be put at risk, and can lead to death if not treated in a timely manner.

In addition to the common complications faced by women who are pregnant, there is an added layer of complexity in cases of rape or incest, especially that of minors. Many abortion laws are so strict that they allow no exceptions for cases of rape or incest, even for minors, as was demonstrated in July 2022 when a 10-year-old girl in the United States became pregnant as a result of rape was forced to travel across state borders to get an abortion, where it was legal.¹⁸ However, not all young girls are as lucky, as was the case of a 14-year-old girl in Paraguay, who was not allowed to get an abortion due to strict laws, and was killed during childbirth, because her body was not ready or developed enough to have a baby.¹⁹

Strict abortion laws also impact women of color and women in poverty more as they are tied to systemic barriers. For example, pregnancy related complications and maternal mortality is the sixth highest cause of death of Black women ages 20-44 in the United States,²⁰ and since Black women are more likely to live in places that are both banning abortions and lack contraception and adequate healthcare, they are more likely to have these pregnancy complications.²¹ Additionally, wealthier women are more likely to be able to travel out of state or out of country to places where they can legally get abortions, whereas those who do not have the means to do so are not. Lack of access to abortions for women in poverty could either lead to unsafe, self-induced abortions, or it could force the woman to have the child and force her and the child into deeper poverty.²² In fact, the [Turnaway Study](#) found that "[w]omen denied a wanted abortion who have to

carry an unwanted pregnancy to term have four times greater odds of living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).²³

In some cases, those seeking the care they need are often turned away due to religious beliefs as well. In the United States, one out of six hospital beds are located in Catholic hospitals or facilities that follow their own religious rules when it comes to providing healthcare, which "prohibit a range of reproductive health services, including contraception, sterilization, many infertility treatments, and abortion, even when a woman's life or health is jeopardized by a pregnancy."²⁴ With the prevalence of these institutions, oftentimes there are "entire regions without any option for certain reproductive health care services"²⁵ and lack of abortion care could lead to complications or death of the pregnant woman.

Case Studies:

The case of Gerri Santoro

Gerri Santoro was escaping from an abusive marriage at a time when she was not legally able to obtain a divorce from her husband. When she met another man, Dixon, and got pregnant by him, the couple worried that her husband would find out, so they sought out an abortion. However, as abortion was illegal in the United States at the time,²⁶ they tried to self-induce in a hotel room, which caused complications and hemorrhaging. Dixon panicked and ran away, and Gerri died in the hotel room alone due to complications from the unsafe abortion.²⁷

The case of Izabela Sajbor

Izabela Sajbor was 22 weeks pregnant when she went into premature labor. Weeks earlier, her unborn baby had been diagnosed with a genetic

condition that would likely leave it dead before it was even born. However, due to strict Polish abortion laws, doctors refused to perform an abortion while the fetus still had a heartbeat. By the time the fetal heartbeat stopped, and doctors took Izabela to perform a C-section, her heart had already stopped functioning, leaving her dead – a death that could have been avoided, had she been allowed an abortion prior to the fetal heartbeat stopping.²⁸

Promising Practices:

Although the recent restriction on reproductive rights in the United States is leading to pushback on rights in many countries, there are still many States that provide different degrees of abortion access around the world. View this interactive [map](#), put together by the [Center for Reproductive Rights](#) (CRR), that explains in detail the laws and restrictions that each country has. CRR is also one of the many organizations worldwide that works to advance and expand reproductive rights through legislation in both the United States and around the world.

[Women on Waves](#) is an organization based in the Netherlands, where abortion is legal, and runs various campaigns to provide abortions to women in countries where it is illegal. Some programs they run include the [Abortion Ship Campaign](#), which sails to countries where abortion is illegal and provides abortion pills to women just outside territorial waters, where the country's laws no longer apply,²⁹ or the [Abortion Robots](#), which sends drones in countries where abortion is illegal to offer telehealth and prescriptions from the Netherlands. Since the operator is based outside of the country the

drone is in, the laws of that country do not apply.³⁰

International Standards:

In 2022, the WHO released a comprehensive [Abortion care guideline](#) which presents "the complete set of all WHO recommendations and best practice statements relating to abortion."³¹ Not only does this toolkit give fact sheets and suggestions on abortions and essential sexual and reproductive healthcare, but [Annex A](#) also presents a complete list of international human rights standards and mechanisms that make mention of women's rights, women's health, sexual and reproductive health, and even specifically abortion rights.

Additionally, since 2011, the [Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights](#) has been celebrating September 28 as [International Safe Abortion Day](#), although the day had significance in Latin America far earlier. Chosen for the day slavery was abolished in Brazil, it is now celebrated as a day of the free womb, and activists use it to demand abortion rights for women everywhere.³² Each year, a new theme and toolkit is released for worldwide action and advocacy to ensure that women's sexual and reproductive rights are protected.

Action Menu:



Governments:

- Recognize abortion as an essential healthcare service for women's sexual and reproductive health and codify rights or lift bans that put

women's lives at risk. In the United States, this can be done in the form of passing the Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA), which will protect abortion rights for all women.³³



Healthcare Institutions:

- Ensure that women get the care they need in cases of dangerous or unwanted pregnancies so that they do not resort to life threatening measures to terminate.
- In areas where abortions are banned, collect disaggregated data on maternal mortality that could be prevented by abortions, as long as the privacy of patients is not compromised.



Individuals and communities:

- Write to your elected officials using the templates provided in the 2022 Global 16 Days Campaign Action Toolkit to encourage them to pass legislation to codify women's healthcare.
- Participate in protests and rallies to show your support for abortion rights and volunteer as an escort at clinics where women seeking abortions and abortion providers are harassed and intimidated.
- Join or initiate Twitter chats, Tweetathons, Facebook/Instagram live conversations, or other social media calls to action and engage

@16DaysCampaign accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, using hashtags #LetsEndFemicide, #RatifyILO190 and #16DaysCampaign.

- Sign and disseminate the Global 16 Days Campaign petition calling on the United Nations (UN) to declare December 6 as the International Day to End Femicide. Petition link [here](#).

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This Fact Sheet is dedicated to the women who have been victims of indirect Femicide due to unsafe abortions and maternal mortality, as well as their families, friends, and communities who continue to fight for justice and demand action and accountability to make a world without violence possible.



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²⁶ Gerri's story takes place prior to Roe vs Wade in the United States. A photo taken of her when her body was discovered became a rallying cry for abortion rights activists as they campaigned for the right to choose.

²⁷ The Tragedy of Illegal Abortion: Gerri Santoro's Lonesome Death (Personal PAC).

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