

May 12, 2006

Linking Research to Action to End Unsafe Abortion in Africa and Save Women's Lives

Conference Consensus Statement

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
March 23, 2006

The women of Africa struggle daily to fulfill their aspirations despite the burdens of poverty, gender inequality, and violations of their human rights. While many African women have overcome great adversity to assume leadership at community and national levels, they often are excluded from the decisions that most affect them, including decisions about childbearing. Moreover, because their most basic health needs are systematically neglected, African women are more likely to die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth than women anywhere else in the world.

Tens of millions of African women will experience an unsafe abortion in their lifetimes. Especially if they are poor and young, many will suffer serious injuries, lifelong disabilities, or death. Virtually all these deaths can be prevented and complications treated with simple, inexpensive medical technologies. Better access to comprehensive reproductive health care -- including contraception and emergency contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies, safe abortion and postabortion care -- is essential if African countries are to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of a 75% reduction in maternal mortality by 2015.

It has been over a decade since governments of the world agreed in Cairo and Beijing that unsafe abortion is a "major public health concern" requiring a concerted response. Since then, many countries have improved postabortion care. A few, such as South Africa, have increased access to safe abortion services and realized major declines in abortion-related mortality and morbidity. Nevertheless, action in most countries has been too slow, and, as research shows, women continue to die needlessly.

Today we—more than 120 researchers, medical and public health practitioners, advocates for women's health, media representatives, and policymakers—commit ourselves and call on others to do more to expose the realities of women's experiences with unsafe abortion, examine its causes, and promote the policies and programs best able to end this ongoing tragedy. Additional credible research, including research that captures the voices of women, is needed to compel public action and overcome the stigma that surrounds abortion.

We support the recent call by health ministers in Africa for an allocation of at least 2 percent of their health budgets to research, including reproductive health research. Governments, health providers and others must in turn translate research findings into programs that better meet women's needs.

Our agenda for research and action focuses on these critical gaps:

New information on the magnitude and health consequences of unsafe abortion in Africa, including

- new estimates of the incidence of unsafe abortion in countries without recent national surveys
- improved estimates of the morbidity and mortality resulting from unsafe abortion
- the cost to health systems and society of treating unsafe abortion complications

Community-level studies of the causes, conditions, and effects of unsafe abortion, including quantitative and qualitative research to help document

- the reasons women seek unsafe abortions
- the causes of unintended pregnancy and the role of contraception in preventing unintended pregnancies and abortion
- social and economic consequences of unsafe abortion for women and their families
- conditions surrounding provision of abortion in different settings and differences in health outcomes
- the unequal access to safe abortion for poor women and rural women
- the needs of special populations, such as adolescents and women living with HIV
- public attitudes about abortion, with attention to community leaders, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders

Health systems research to compare the cost and effectiveness of alternative policies and programs, including

- ways to ensure prompt, high quality, humane postabortion care at all levels of the health system
- models for the provision of woman-centered, comprehensive abortion care, including postabortion contraception to prevent repeat abortions
- the comparative costs of providing safe abortion using recommended standards of care versus continued treatment of complications from unsafe abortion
- the role and potential of midlevel providers and medication abortion for improving access to care
- studies of how to integrate abortion-related counseling and care with services for HIV prevention and treatment.

We welcome the plan for a ***Consortium for Research on Unsafe Abortion*** in Africa, to mobilize resources in support of these priorities for research and technical exchange, to build additional capacity in Africa to conduct research and communicate the results effectively, and to contribute to informed advocacy and policy dialogue across the region.

We know that research alone is not enough. We also commit ourselves to communicate what we know about the need to expand women's access to safe abortion care and to reach political leaders, mass media, and the wider public with accurate information on this public health crisis. We will contribute to continued networking and mutual support among all who participated in this conference and all others who share our common goal.

We will work together to ensure that governments, international agencies, and other powerful institutions are held accountable for their failure to act in the face of compelling evidence about the effects of unsafe abortion on women's lives, health and wellbeing on the one hand, and on the other hand, the ready availability of cost-effective solutions. The future of the women of Africa and their families depends on our collective efforts. We must act now.

* * * * *

Initial signatories:

African Network for Research and Training in Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV (REPRONET)
African Population and Health Research Center
The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)
Ethiopian Society of Obstetricians & Gynecologists
Guttmacher Institute
Gynuity Health Projects
Ibis Reproductive Health
International Planned Parenthood Federation, Africa Region
Ipas Africa Alliance for Women's Reproductive Health and Rights
Ipas-US
Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit, the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
West African Health Organization
Women's Health and Action Research Centre, Nigeria
Women's Health Research Unit, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Yelfigne Abegaz, Royal Netherlands Embassy, Ethiopia

Additional signatories to come

Contact:

Dr. Eunice Brookman-Amissah
Vice President for Africa
Ipas
Nairobi, Kenya
brookmanae@ipas.or.ke