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of Women (ECOSOC3)

# Research Report

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Topic 1: The question of the right and access to abortion



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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Key Terms.....	4
Context.....	6
Major Actors.....	8
Previous/Relevant UN Resolutions.....	9
Bibliography.....	9



## Introduction

Abortion is the deliberate termination of a pregnancy through the use of medicine or surgery to remove the embryo or fetus as well as the placenta from the uterus.

The past fifty years have been marked by a distinct debate surrounding the extent to which women should have the right and access to abortion. This debate has been characterized by the trend towards the legalization of abortion on a global scale, especially in the Western and industrial world.

A substantial amount of people and states worldwide believe that it is a woman's right to determine whether or not to have an abortion, however, others believe on religious, moral, ethical, political, emotional (or a combination thereof) that abortions are wrong and should be prohibited or banned.

Although many countries still do not permit abortion, the rates are still similar between states that freely allow abortion and ones with highly restrictive abortion laws, floating around 34 and 37 abortions per 1000 women annually<sup>1</sup>. Research shows that abortion rates are higher in developing regions than in developed regions, further estimating that approximately 25 million unsafe abortions take place yearly, almost all of them in developing countries, 8 million of these were carried out in the least safe, or rather, most dangerous conditions<sup>2</sup>. Annually, between 4.7% and 13.2% of maternal deaths can be attributed to unsafe abortions. Around 7 million women are admitted to hospitals due to unsafe abortions, the cost of these treatments are estimated at US\$ 553 million<sup>3</sup>.

Nearly every death or disability caused by abortion was preventable through sex education, effective modern contraceptives, legally induced abortion, and timely care for complications<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Vogelstein, Rachel B., and Rebecca Turkington. "Abortion Law: Global Comparisons." *ForeignAffairs.com*. Last modified October 28, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/article/abortion-law-global-comparisons>.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. "Preventing Unsafe Abortions." *who.int*. Last modified June 26, 2019. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/preventing-unsafe-abortion>.

<sup>3</sup> Vlassoff et al. Economic impact of unsafe abortion-related morbidity and mortality: evidence and estimation challenges. Brighton, Institute of Development Studies, 2008 (IDS Research Reports 59).

<sup>4</sup> L Haddad. Unsafe Abortion: Unnecessary Maternal Mortality. *Rev Obstet Gynecol*. 2009 Spring; 2(2): 122–126.

## Key Terms

**Abortion:** the deliberate termination of a pregnancy through the use of medicine or surgery to remove the embryo or fetus as well as the placenta from the uterus.

**Uterus:** the organ in the body of a woman or other female mammal in which a baby develops before birth.

**Embryo:** a human being or an animal in an early stage of development either in its mother's uterus or in an egg.

**Fetus:** a young human or animal before birth, after the organs have started to develop.

**Pro-choice:** supporting the belief that a pregnant woman should have the freedom to choose to have an abortion, regardless of whether or not you would ever choose to have one yourself.

**Pro-life:** opposed to the belief that a pregnant woman should have the freedom to choose to have an abortion, usually on the grounds of the belief that abortion is murder.

**State:** a country or its government.

**Resolution:** an official decision that is made after a group or organization has voted.

**Ratify:** (especially of governments or organizations)

1. to make an agreement official.
2. to agree in writing a set of rules, or to officially approve a decision or plan.

**MEDC:** More economically developed country.

**LEDC:** Less economically developed country.

**Contraceptives:** any of various devices or drugs intended to prevent pregnancy.

**Roe v. Wade:** a landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1973 which ruled that utilizing excessive government restriction to deny a pregnant woman's liberty to elect to have an abortion as unconstitutional.

**NGO:** Non-governmental organization; an organization that tries to achieve social or political aims but is not controlled by a state or government.

**IGO:** Intergovernmental organization; composed primarily of sovereign states, or other IGOs. IGOs are established by a treaty that acts as a charter creating the group, e.g. the UN.

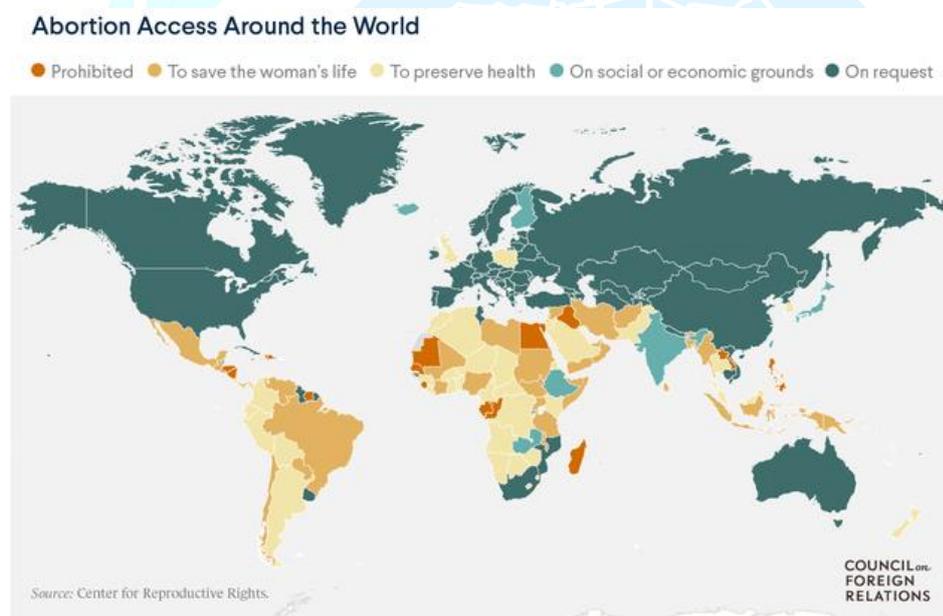
**Non-State Actor:** an individual, group, or organization that has significant political influence but is not allied with a particular state or country.

**WHO:** World Health Organization; a special agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health. (Parent organization: ECOSOC council).



## Context

Twenty-six countries have currently banned abortion in all its forms and for all reasons, including disregard of rape or incest. Thirty-seven countries prohibit abortion unless it is the only way to save the mother's life. 59% of women of reproductive age, that is, 900 million women, live in countries which broadly allow abortion, however, 41% of women, or 700 million women of reproductive age live under restrictive abortion laws which compromise their health, and their right to life<sup>6</sup>.



<sup>7</sup> In 1994, 179 states signalled their commitment to prevent unsafe abortions and reduce maternal mortality by signing the International Conference on Population and

Development Programme of Action (ICPD), which was the first international consensus document recognizing reproductive rights as human rights. In the 26 years since, with almost 50 countries passing laws which expand the grounds on which women are permitted abortions, we have seen an overwhelming global trend towards liberal abortion laws<sup>8</sup>. The prohibition of abortion, however, has never proved to be an effective tool in the

<sup>5</sup> "Countries Where Abortion Is Illegal 2020." World Population Review. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-where-abortion-is-illegal>.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Reproductive Rights. "Abortion Rights Are Human Rights." [reproductiverights.org. https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?category\[297\]=297](https://reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?category[297]=297).

<sup>7</sup> Vogelstein, Rachel B., and Rebecca Turkington. "Abortion Law: Global Comparisons." ForeignAffairs.com. Last modified October 28, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/article/abortion-law-global-comparisons>.

<sup>8</sup> Center for Reproductive Rights. *Accelerating Progress: Liberalization of Abortion Laws since ICPD*. May 5, 2019. <https://reproductiverights.org/sites/default/files/documents/World-Abortion-Map-AcceleratingProgress.pdf>.

prevention of abortion. Before countries started legalizing abortions, women would get dangerous, self-induced abortions using tools such as clothes hangers for the procedure or pay for exorbitantly priced illegal medical procedures in unsterile environments with tools that have not been properly sterilized either.

For example, *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling which granted women the right to abortion on a federal scale, was not the beginning of abortion in the United States, although it allowed access to legal abortion preventing women from dying from unsafe abortions. According to official reports, 1/6 of all pregnancy-related deaths in 1965 were certain to be caused by illegal abortions, although experts believe the real number to be significantly higher<sup>9</sup>.

Restrictive abortion laws were particularly harsh on low income citizens and were disproportionately impacted. A study from the 1960s conducted in New York City, surveying low-income women, showed that nearly one in ten (8%) had attempted to terminate a pregnancy by means of illegal abortion at one point or other; nearly four in ten (38%) knew of a relative, friend, or acquaintance who had attempted to obtain an abortion. In the same study, eight in ten (77%) of women who stated to have attempted a self-induced abortion, only 2% said that a medical practitioner had been involved in some form<sup>10</sup>.

Since then abortion has become one of the safest medical procedures in the United States, the safety rate at over 99%<sup>11</sup>.

Nonetheless, in the early 1970s, when abortion was legalized in some U.S. states, legal abortions were often out of reach, especially women in minority groups. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 39 out of the 130,000 women who obtained illegal or self-induced abortions in 1972 died. Moreover, the mortality rate for non-white and Puerto Rican women was 12 times that for white women between 1972 to 1974<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Planned Parenthood. "Roe v. Wade: The Constitutional Right to Access Safe, Legal Abortion." [plannedparenthoodaction.org](https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade).  
<https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade>.

<sup>10</sup> Gold, Rachel Benson. "Lessons from Before Roe: Will Past be Prologue?" *Review. Guttmacher Policy Review* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2003).  
<https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2003/03/lessons-roe-will-past-be-prologue>.

<sup>11</sup> Planned Parenthood. "Roe v. Wade: The Constitutional Right to Access Safe, Legal Abortion." [plannedparenthoodaction.org](https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade).  
<https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade>.

<sup>12</sup> Koonin, Lisa M., Jack C. Smith, and Merrell Ramick Clarice A. Green. "Abortion Surveillance -- United States, 1992." [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov/MMWR/PREVIEW/MMWRHTML/00041486.htm). Last modified May 3, 1996.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/MMWR/PREVIEW/MMWRHTML/00041486.htm>.

## Major Actors

**USA:** Roe v. Wade legalized abortion on a federal level, however, states are pushing to restrict abortion laws once again, with states such as Ohio, Alabama, and Kentucky imposing either direct bans on abortion, or at a point before most women are even aware of the pregnancy such as 6- or 8-week bans, which criminalize abortion after the 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy<sup>13</sup>.

**Russia:** In 1920, the Russian Soviet Republic became the first country in the modern era to allow abortion in all circumstances, however, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legality has fluctuated more than once, another ban being enacted between 1936 to 1955<sup>14</sup>.

**Mexico:** Mexico City has allowed abortions since 1931 in cases of rape, only legalizing it in 2000 in cases of where the mother's health is at risk or the fetus shows signs of severe birth defects. In Oaxaca, the procedure is legal upon request, however, abortion remains heavily restricted in the other 30 states. In a ruling in July 2020, the Supreme Court rejected a landmark injunction on abortion rights across the country<sup>15</sup>.

**Planned Parenthood:** Planned Parenthood is a pro-choice nonprofit NGO that provides reproductive healthcare globally, but primarily in the United States.

**Guttmacher Institute:** A pro-choice research organization founded in 1968 that works to study, educate, and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights. It works mainly in the United States but also focuses on developing countries.

**National Right to Life:** The United States' oldest and largest pro-life organization.

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<sup>13</sup> Planned Parenthood. "Access to abortion is legal, constitutionally protected, and supported by most Americans." [plannedparenthoodaction.org](https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion). <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion>.

<sup>14</sup> Talaver, Sasha. "When Soviet Women Won the Right to Abortion (For the Second Time)." Jacobin. Last modified August 3, 2020. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/03/soviet-women-abortion-ussr-history-health-care>.

<sup>15</sup> BBC (England). "Mexico Supreme Court rejects state's bid to decriminalise abortion." July 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-53584575>.

## Previous/Relevant UN Resolutions

- Resolution 2011/1 Fertility, reproductive health and development -> [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/pdf/commission/2011/documents/CPD44\\_Res2011-1b.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/pdf/commission/2011/documents/CPD44_Res2011-1b.pdf)

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