

Breaking the silence: A successful strategy for starting conversations on access to safe abortion with policy makers in Zimbabwe

Background

Civil society organisations in Zimbabwe working to disseminate information on the restrictive Termination of Pregnancy Act are advocating for changes to the abortion law.

The Abortion Incidence and Morbidity study carried out by the Guttmacher Institute and the University of Zimbabwe showed that women and girls have been procuring unsafe abortions (Elizabeth A. Sully, 2018).

Intervention

Women's Action Group (WAG) partnered with Population Bureau to form a national task force that developed a communication tool entitled “Breaking the Silence”. The task force was chaired by the Ministry of Health and Child Care. This was strategic as the tool was accepted at all levels of society. The video gave evidence on how women are dying from unsafe abortions and gave solutions to the problem of unsafe abortions. It also put forward evidence on the cost of providing post-abortion care compared to offering a safe abortion and addressed issues of abortion stigma.



Discussion

The video was launched at a national conference in Zimbabwe. It has been shown to different portfolio committees of parliament including health, justice and social services, as well as to traditional leaders who are members of the senate. The video appealed to the emotions of the policy makers, there was deafening silence in the room as they watched. Many members then shared their or their family's personal abortion experiences. It was agreed that this was an issue that needs to be addressed.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that abortion was taboo to discuss in Zimbabwe, particularly at policy maker level we have learnt that there is need to design a clear strategy for engagement. There is need to use evidence not emotions in arguments for abortion access.

Dialogue on access to safe abortion is continuing with parliamentarians having agreed that the starting point is to develop regulations on how the current Zimbabwean abortion law can be implemented. The regulations are provided for in the Termination Of Pregnancy (TOP) Act. Parliamentarians have agreed that there is need to broaden circumstances when abortion can be provided.