

Feminist advocacy for safe abortion and bodily autonomy: Lessons from Zimbabwe, Mildred Mushunje

Objective:

To share experiences from Zimbabwe on the impact of feminist advocacy for women and girls' access to safe abortion services and bodily autonomy

Design

Abortions are a fundamentally feminist topic, touching on bodily autonomy, sex and sexuality, private versus public sphere and intersecting with many other factors such as poverty, class, education, income among others . Bodily autonomy is the right to “make decisions about one’s own life and future.” Accessing safe abortion means having the ability to afford it, physically get to an abortion provider..”. Feminists affirm abortion as an important option for women, not every woman that becomes pregnant wants to carry the pregnancy to term and safe choices are necessary. Abortion remains highly contested in Zimbabwe and this stems from deeply rooted convictions based on religious, traditional, cultural, and moralistic persuasions. Political will for unrestricted circumstances for abortion remains very limited as evidenced by the hesitancy to review the 1977 Termination of Pregnancy Act (ToP) which allows for abortion under the circumstances of rape, incest and health. Feminist advocates have been at the helm of initiatives to expand the circumstances. Women and girls are victims of stigma associated with abortion even when they have the legal right to have an abortion.

Method

A working group of feminists was set up which took responsibility for reviewing the Termination of Pregnancy and providing recommendations based on the reality on the ground. This group comprised of informal abortion service providers, mid-wives, legal service providers, social workers and gynaecologists. A comprehensive review of the ToP Act and the administrative procedures was undertaken, and this has been used to lobby Parliamentarians and the Justice Ministry to adopt the proposed changes. Included in the reviewed documents are the expansion of circumstances for abortion, task sharing amongst the health personnel in line with the 2022 WHO Abortion guidelines.

Results

Much traction was gained by engaging key stakeholders such as Parliamentarians and community opinion leaders. There was also a strong movement in communities which also started to advocate for the adoption of the proposed changes in the ToP and administrative guidelines. Parliamentary champions are a key factor in bringing the abortion agenda to the fore of parliamentary debates. Continuous evidence gathering is key for informed advocacy.

Conclusion

Feminist advocacy for women and girls' access to safe abortion needs to include other key stakeholders and opinion leaders. A comprehensive referral system that includes mental health support has to be part of the package for abortion services.