



## **Background on Amnesty International's Policy on Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

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Amnesty International has a long history of campaigning on issues related to reproductive and sexual health, especially in the context of its work to stop the global epidemic of violence against women. As the world's largest human rights organization, Amnesty International has led protests against coerced abortion, sterilization and contraception; demanded the prosecution of rapes committed as a weapon of war; called for an end to female genital mutilation and "virginity testing," and campaigned against the imposition of the death penalty for women charged under laws criminalizing abortion and adultery after giving birth outside of marriage.

As part of its Campaign to Stop Violence against Women, launched in 2004, Amnesty International has documented widespread, terrible injustices, including rape, incest and other forms of violence that often lead to unwanted pregnancy. Women who are raped under these circumstances are doubly stigmatized; first, as victims of sexual abuse and then for becoming pregnant. In the context of war, rape has been committed with the deliberate intention of causing pregnancy, thereby destroying community and family bonds through the pernicious influences of humiliation and shame.

For example, in Darfur, Sudan, much of the violence has resulted in grave human rights violations against women and girls, including abductions and rape. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an estimated 250,000 women have been raped during the four-year armed conflict. Abortion is illegal in the DRC and many women who seek to terminate their pregnancies have undergone unsafe abortions that often cause debilitating health conditions.

With the goal of strengthening its work to address the suffering and injustice related to these reproductive health issues, Amnesty International has adopted a policy to better address certain specific issues associated with sexual and reproductive health.

Amnesty International's decision will enable the organization to:

- Oppose imprisonment and other criminal penalties for abortion, both for women seeking or having abortions and for those providing information about or performing abortions.
- Support access to comprehensive medical care, including safe termination of pregnancy, for women who become pregnant as a result of rape, sexual assault or incest -- or whose lives or health are at grave risk due to pregnancy.
- Urge governments to ensure access to health and other services to women who have complications from unsafe abortions, regardless of the legal status of abortion in the country.

The policy was adopted after nearly two years of consultation with the organization's 2.2 million members and supporters in 74 countries. These discussions took place in the context of the disturbing magnitude of deaths and irreversible health consequences suffered by women worldwide:

- An estimated 70,000 women die each year from unsafe, illegal abortions, according to the UN Millennium Project.
- Five million women a year are hospitalized as a result of complications from unsafe abortions, which can cause serious disability, infection and lifelong pain and infertility.
- The overwhelming burden of these deaths and injuries falls on poor women living in the developing world.

Under our policy, we call on states to:

- Provide women and men with full information on sexual and reproductive health.
- Repeal laws that allow women to be charged, imprisoned or otherwise subjected to criminal penalties for seeking or having an abortion.
- Ensure that any woman who suffers complications from an abortion will have access to the medical services she needs, whether she obtained the abortion legally or illegally.
- Ensure access to abortion services to any woman who becomes pregnant as the result of rape, sexual assault, or incest, or where a pregnancy poses a risk to a woman's life or a grave risk to her health.

Amnesty International does not take a position on whether abortion should be legal or whether it is right or wrong. Amnesty does not counsel individuals as to whether they should continue or terminate a pregnancy, nor will Amnesty campaign generally for abortion. The policy allows Amnesty International to address specific issues associated with abortion to the extent that these are directly relevant to the organization's work, such as the right to health, and violence against women.

Some religious believers consider abortion a violation of the right to life. International law is silent on the question of when life begins and Amnesty International takes no position on this question. The organization recognizes and respects the diversity of religious viewpoints on abortion and believes that one of its greatest strengths has been the solidarity forged among people of diverse beliefs who nonetheless share a commitment to ending human suffering. In this spirit, the organization's leadership believes that its members and supporters can continue to collaborate on specific human rights issues without having to change or challenge their moral standpoint or views on issues such as abortion. It is in this spirit that Amnesty International calls on its members and supporters to work with the organization to end violence against women, which often lies at the root of many unwanted pregnancies.