



# HOW to REPORT on ABORTION

A guide for journalists, editors and media outlets

International  
Campaign  
for Women's  
Right to Safe  
Abortion



*Produced by the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion<sup>1</sup> in collaboration with the International Planned Parenthood Federation<sup>2</sup>, London, November 2017*

## Introduction

The way abortion is presented in the media can have a major influence on people's thinking. This guide has been written for those working in the media to encourage accurate reporting of the facts about abortion, and honest portrayals of abortion as part of real people's lives and relationships.

## Facts about abortion

**Abortion is common:** Worldwide, one in every four pregnancies ends in abortion<sup>3</sup>, and over 56 million women have an abortion annually. Women of all reproductive ages have abortions, both married and single, both with children and without. The majority of abortions are in the 21-34 age group because women get pregnant most often at those ages.<sup>4</sup>

**Abortion is one of the safest medical and surgical procedures:** when managed by a trained person, including nurses and midwives, as World Health Organization (WHO) data have shown.<sup>5</sup>

**Abortion does not cause mental health problems:**<sup>6</sup> However, being denied an abortion

and forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term is associated with harm to the woman and potentially problems for the resulting child.<sup>7</sup>

**Restricting abortion does not prevent or reduce abortions but keeps them unsafe:** Abortion rates in countries which legally restrict abortion are actually higher than those where abortion is available on request<sup>8</sup>, not least because women also do not have good access to contraception either.<sup>9</sup>

**All but a few countries allow abortion for one or more of the following reasons:**

- ✓ To protect the life of the woman
- ✓ To protect her physical or mental health
- ✓ In cases of rape or sexual abuse
- ✓ Serious fetal anomaly
- ✓ Socio-economic reasons
- ✓ At the woman's request

Even where these grounds are included in the law, however, women may struggle to access safe abortions due to other barriers such as restrictive regulations and lack of accessible and affordable clinical services.<sup>10</sup>

**Most abortions happen early in pregnancy:** that is, they happen within the

1. [www.safeabortionwomensright.org](http://www.safeabortionwomensright.org)

2. [www.ippf.org](http://www.ippf.org)

3. WHO (2017) "Preventing Unsafe Abortion - Fact Sheet" [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en)

4. PRB (2011) "Abortion Facts and Figures" [www.prb.org/pdf11/abortion-facts-and-figures-2011.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf11/abortion-facts-and-figures-2011.pdf)

5. WHO (2017) "Preventing Unsafe Abortion - Fact Sheet" [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs388/en)

6. American Psychological Association, Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion (2008) "Report of the Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion" [www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/abortion/executive-summary.pdf](http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/abortion/executive-summary.pdf)

7. Henry P David (October 1992) "Born Unwanted: Long-Term Developmental Effects of Denied Abortion" [www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1992.tb00902.x/abstract](http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1992.tb00902.x/abstract)

8. Guttmacher Institute (2016) "Restrictive laws do not stop women from having abortions" [www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2016/restrictive-laws-do-not-stop-women-having-abortions](http://www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2016/restrictive-laws-do-not-stop-women-having-abortions)

9. WHO and Guttmacher Institute (2017) "Global, regional, and subregional classification of abortions by safety, 2010-14: estimates from a Bayesian hierarchical model" [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)31794-4/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)31794-4/fulltext)

10. Guttmacher Institute (2012) "Making Abortion Services Accessible in the Wake of Legal Reforms: A Framework and Six Case Studies" [www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/abortion-services-laws\\_0.pdf](http://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/abortion-services-laws_0.pdf)

first 12 weeks and even earlier when medical abortion pills are available. Abortions that happen after 12 weeks may be due to a diagnosis of fetal anomaly, legal barriers, practical issues such as needing time to find the money or to travel a long distance or across a border, which can cause important delays in accessing care.<sup>11</sup>

## Balance and truth

When reporting on abortion issues, use bona fide evidence from the country or region you are covering, so that your publication is grounded in the most accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date statistical information and health data. In writing about those who are anti-abortion, and in making an effort to avoid bias in reporting, you do not need to publish false information or repeat untrue claims as if they were true, even though opinions and moral perspectives may differ.

11. Marge Berer (2002) "Making Abortions Safe: A Matter of Good Public Health Policy and Practice" [www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1016/S0968-8080%2802%2900021-6](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1016/S0968-8080%2802%2900021-6)



Remember that “pro-choice isn’t the ‘opposite’ of anti-abortion: Anti-abortion organisations think that abortion is unacceptable in any situation and would like to see the practice outlawed. The opposing view to this would be a pro-abortion stance – the view that abortion is always the right solution to unwanted pregnancy, which of course no organisation would advocate. The pro-choice viewpoint is inherently balanced as it respects each individual’s right to decide what’s best for them”.<sup>12</sup>

12. Education For Choice (2011) Why does EFC recommend against inviting anti-abortion speakers into schools? [www.educationforchoice.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/why-does-efc-recommend-against-inviting.html](http://www.educationforchoice.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/why-does-efc-recommend-against-inviting.html)

## DO-S AND DON'T-S



Do Say	Don't Say	Why
Abortion rights advocates	Pro-abortion	The BBC's style guide says: 'avoid pro-abortion, and use pro-choice instead. Campaigners favour a woman's right to choose, rather than abortion itself.'
Safe abortion advocates		Providing safe abortions is about giving pregnant people the right to make their own reproductive decisions. If pregnancy and abortion are safe, women can decide whether or not to continue a pregnancy. If abortion is unsafe and illegal, only those who are opposed to abortion have a choice.
Pro-choice		
Anti-abortion	Pro-life	Reuters says: 'describe those campaigning for a woman's right to have an abortion as "abortion rights campaigners" and those campaigning against abortion rights as "anti-abortion campaigners."'
Anti-choice	Pro-family	
Believe abortion should be illegal		'Pro-life' inaccurately suggests that those who support access to safe, legal abortion are 'anti-life', when in fact they make the woman's life the priority. 'Pro-family' implies that abortion and motherhood are mutually exclusive, when in fact the same women who have abortions also have children. Those who support the right to safe abortion are pro-woman, pro-family and pro-choice.



Do Say	Don't Say	Why
<p>Pregnant woman</p> <p>Pregnant woman's partner/husband</p>	<p>Mother/father</p> <p>Parent</p>	<p>Pregnant ≠ mother. That is, not all pregnant women are mothers of children nor are all male partners fathers.</p>
<p>Embryo (up to 10 weeks gestation)</p> <p>Fetus (from 10 weeks gestation to delivery)</p> <p>The pregnancy</p>	<p>Baby</p> <p>Unborn baby/child</p>	<p>An embryo or fetus is not yet a baby. It must be born first. The term "unborn child" is a recent anti-abortion invention and a contradiction in terms. Human rights begin only at birth.</p>
<p>Terminate/end a pregnancy</p> <p>Have an abortion</p>	<p>Abort / get rid of a child</p> <p>Kill an unborn child</p>	<p>Women should not be criminalized – crediting women's reproductive decision is important, and accurately reflects how abortion is a responsible legitimate decision.</p>
<p>Abortion is legally restricted</p>	<p>Abortion is illegal</p>	<p>Many people think abortion is completely illegal in their country when it is in fact legal on certain grounds. Because of this, legal abortions are often not provided, although they could and should be. Report the legal status accurately so that women are aware of their legal rights.</p>
<p>Sex selective abortion</p> <p>Abortion on grounds of serious fetal anomaly</p>	<p>Female feticide</p> <p>Gendercide</p> <p>Abort disabled children</p>	<p>The suffix '-cide' denotes 'murder' which is not appropriate when describing abortion; murder is only committed against people. And both the right to life and discrimination on grounds of sex or disability apply only after birth.</p>
<p>More than one abortion</p>	<p>Repeat abortion</p>	<p>Women can become pregnant from early adolescence to menopause, i.e. every month for as many as 40 years. Contraceptives are used but can fail, and can fail more than once in a lifetime. And women may not always be able to obtain or use them effectively.</p> <p>'Repeat' when used about abortion has negative connotations of irresponsibility, such as 'repeat offenders'.</p>
<p>Prevent unintended pregnancies</p> <p>Reduce the number of unintended pregnancies</p>	<p>Prevent abortion</p> <p>Reduce the number of abortions</p>	<p>It is unintended pregnancy that needs to be prevented and avoided when possible. This requires high quality education and information and access to a range of contraceptive methods.</p> <p>Abortion should not be seen as a problem but as a possible solution when unwanted pregnancy occurs.</p>
<p>A woman's right to life and health</p>	<p>The right to life of an unborn child</p>	<p>It is worth repeating that it is the pregnant woman who has a right to life and health. The embryo/fetus is totally dependent on the woman's health and life, which must always be put first.</p>



## Use accurate imagery of pregnancy and abortion

**USE photos, images, and infographics that reflect the public health situation** of abortion and the abortion policy in your country, and report news about the campaigns and people (parliamentarians, health professionals, legal experts and women's health and rights advocates) who are seeking to make abortion safe for women's sake.



Still from IPPF's Women's Voices film



Image of abortion medication from Women on Web



Protest image from the Women's March in London, 2017

**CHECK that your editor has not used stigmatising or inaccurate visuals and images** when you have written an informative article about deaths and injury from unsafe abortion, or efforts to reform law and services and the importance of safe abortion for women.

**AVOID inaccurate images of big bellies in late pregnancy and images that make a fetus/embryo look like a fully formed baby:**

Most abortions happen before a woman is showing any visible outward sign of pregnancy, so it is not accurate to use images of big bellies, especially those that cut the woman out of the image except for her 'bump'. Abortions also happen months before the fetus is fully formed. These images are used by anti-abortion groups to falsify the reality in the hopes of creating guilt and putting women off a decision they feel they need to make.



## Reporting personal stories of abortion

**PUBLISH personal testimonies of women who want to share their stories** so that others can know they are not alone. Reveal their name and personal details only if they feel safe about this. Where abortion is legally restricted, it may be better for them to remain completely anonymous. Do not treat personal stories as representative of all women's experiences.

**FRAME abortion as a legitimate choice and credit women's decision-making** as rational and based on what they believe is best for their own lives and those of their partners and families, and their reasons why the pregnancy is unwanted. The great majority of women are relieved after an abortion because it has given them their own lives back.

## Further reading

For more in-depth guidance on abortion messaging check out: How to talk about abortion: A guide to rights-based messaging <http://www.ippf.org/resource/how-talk-about-abortion-guide-rights-based-messaging>

For more information on how to write about abortion as a journalist check out: International Campaign For Women's Safe Right to Abortion at [www.safeabortionwomensright.org/press-room](http://www.safeabortionwomensright.org/press-room)