

Ethical treatment of women in women's health and human rights

A statement from the FIGO (International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics) Committee on Human Rights, Refugees and Violence against Women

Health is a human right, and all women and children deserve access to the highest possible standards of physical, mental, preventive, reproductive and sexual health care.

This right must hold true wherever women and children live, regardless of their legal status; it cannot be sacrificed or compromised even when political turmoil places them at such risk.

Ethical sensitivity is based on awareness that, in many settings, women have a different, often subordinate or disadvantaged, status from that held by men. This status is associated with the different functions that women tend to perform, such as caring for newborn and young children, and disabled and elderly members of their families, rather than being engaged at the forefront of social, economic and political life. Care and training are required to ensure that women patients are not viewed through assumptions and stereotypes that deny or compromise the human rights to which they are ethically entitled.

Human rights are detailed in legally binding or influential international treaties, national constitutions and/or national laws and codes, all reflecting contents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This proclamation is based on the United Nations General Assembly statement in 1948.

Rights include:

- rights to security of the person
- to protection against suffering cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment
- to found a family
- to non-discrimination on grounds such as sex, race colour, religion, national or social origin, and birth or other status

Such individual rights are expressions of the first sentence of the Universal Declaration, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

Respecting patients' dignity, whatever their circumstances such as income, age, or origins, goes a long way towards satisfying ethical requirements.

FIGO supports the following ethical principles in women's health:

Respect for Persons: autonomy and protection of the vulnerable is particularly important for women's health. Respect for a person's choices requires the person to have the capacity to make choices, but in many cultures, women are not respected as decision-makers. Women are often vulnerable to social, economic and political incapacities; care must be taken both to maximise their means of exercising autonomous choice, and to protect them from harm, injustice and disrespectful treatment when they are disadvantaged and subject to others' choices.

Benefit and Avoidance of Harm: this principle (Beneficence and Nonmaleficence) represents the clinician's duty to improve the patient's physical and psychological health with a favourable benefit-to-risk ratio. Making sure that the goal of treatment is clear allows clinicians to make sure that the benefits and harms of treatment options are properly assessed in judging the ethical issues at hand, and in particular to assure that policies that impact the direct care of women's health are based on best available evidence.

Justice: addresses what entitlements are due to individuals for their health care. The rights of individuals to fair and equitable distribution of the benefits and the risks or burdens of available health care is particularly relevant regarding women's sexual and reproductive rights. Justice demands that we consider the formulation of health care systems and the extent to which they provide fair access and benefits, particularly for women, who are often shut out of access due to economic, social, or political disadvantages and exclusion. Justice asks if the decision-maker might be compromised by a conflict of interest, or for instance by cultural, religious or other beliefs that do not allow lawful medical means of best serving the woman's needs.

FIGO is a professional organisation that brings together obstetrical and gynecological associations from 132 countries worldwide. We are committed to maintaining the highest levels of professionalism, scientific and ethical standards in support of our vision that women of the world achieve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives.

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