

## The health, rights and wellbeing of women and girls: global, equitable and inalienable

The recent overwhelming political power shift in Afghanistan has raised international concern for the health and wellbeing of women and girls. The fear of eroding the already fragile status of women's health and rights in the country is mounting amid media reports of women having their movement and access to health care restricted.

Afghanistan has [one of the highest maternal mortality rates](#) in the world, according to United Nations data: some 638 women die per 100,000 live births. Poverty, lack of access to health services and gender inequality all contribute to these tragically high numbers, with [fewer than 60% of births](#) overseen by skilled health professionals.

Regardless of location, women and girls can only achieve their full potential in terms of education, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), professional opportunities and personal wellbeing, when attention is paid to all aspects of their health and care, and to enhancing the status of women and girls.

Institutions that provide employment, lifelong skill acquisition and learning and education opportunities for women and girls ultimately enhance communities, improve health outcomes, and serve to stabilise regions and countries. Commitments to international and regional elements that safeguard the health and rights of women and girls around the world are essential.

### FIGO position on the issue

The right to health holds true wherever women and girls live, regardless of their legal status – it cannot be sacrificed or compromised even when political turmoil places individuals at such risk. The [FIGO Committee on Human Rights, Refugees and Violence Against Women](#) aims to recognise, promote and protect the human rights of women and girls facing such situations.

### Long-established and basic human rights

These rights have been in place and recognised internationally for almost three quarters of a century. The [1949 Geneva Conventions](#) – adopted as a direct result of the atrocities seen during the Second World War – states that, “Protected persons are entitled, in all circumstances, to respect for their persons, their honour, their family rights, their religious convictions and practices, and their manners and customs. They shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against all acts of violence or threats thereof and against insults and public curiosity. Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.” The [1977 addition to the Conventions](#) goes further, explicitly prohibiting “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment [and] rape” against non-combatants.

Equitable and sustainable global development cannot be achieved while women are deprived of the power to make informed decisions on all aspects of their lives. This includes SRHR, maternal and newborn health, and the choice of whether to access non-judgmental and confidential health

care services, education and work. Access to such comprehensive services is not only beneficial to the education, empowerment, health and wellbeing of women and girls, but is also beneficial to their families, communities and wider society – culturally, socially and economically.

## Following internationally recognised frameworks

FIGO supports these ethical and human rights principles, and reminds all states, organisations and individuals that a [substantive framework exists](#) – and must be applied – to ensure that gender equality becomes integral to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and accountability.

The rights of women and girls are [particularly pertinent when women face turmoil from war and political unrest](#). FIGO highlights the following components that are essential to ensuring the continued ethical treatment of women and girls.

- **Respect** for individuals, where autonomy and protection of the vulnerable is important, particularly because women and girls are vulnerable to lack of access to education, as well as social, economic and political incapacities. Care must be taken to protect them from harm.
- **Benefit and the avoidance of harm** represents a clinician's duty to improve a patient's physical and mental wellbeing. Health care providers must be allowed the freedom and authority to care for women and girls subjected to harm in war-torn regions of the world.
- **Justice** – women and girls must receive fair, equitable and appropriate care, particularly with regard to their SRHR.
- **Recognition, promotion and protection of the human rights of women and girls** is critical, both globally and at country level. FIGO strongly opposes child and forced marriage and urges action be taken to ensure these are avoided as they go against human rights.

## FIGO commitments

FIGO commits to:

- enhance the status of all women and girls, thus enabling them to realise their full potential of education, SRHR, professional opportunities and personal wellbeing
- raise awareness across professional networks of human rights-based health care assistance
- continue to address the ethical treatment of women and girls and – as the Global Voice for Women's Health – to call for the end of all forms of violence against women
- provide evidence and recommend solutions to end violence against women (VAW), through education, advocacy and translation of research
- work with health leaders around the world to support their efforts to:
  - provide care, mental health support, and access to SRHR services
  - foster respect for the rights of women and girls
  - raise awareness of those subjected to violence, and how to prevent it.

## About FIGO

FIGO is a professional organisation that brings together more than 130 obstetrical and gynaecological associations from all over the world. FIGO's vision is that women of the world achieve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives. We lead on global programme activities, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia.

FIGO advocates on a global stage, especially in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and non-communicable diseases (SDG3). We also work to raise the status of women and enable their active participation to achieve their reproductive and sexual rights, including addressing female-genital mutilation (FGM) and gender-based violence (SDG5).

We also provide education and training for our Member Societies and build capacities of those from low-resource countries through strengthening leadership, good practice and promotion of policy dialogues.

FIGO is in official relations with the World Health Organization and a consultative status with the United Nations.

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