

FIGO welcomes Benin's new law to address preventable maternal deaths and disability by improving access to safe abortion

Benin's Parliament passed a new legal amendment to the Sexual Health and Reproduction (SRH) 2003 Law on Wednesday 20 October 2021, which is a much-needed step to address preventable maternal deaths and disability suffered by women, girls and their families due to unsafe abortion.

The new amendment (Article 17) to the SRH 2003 law expands the ground as to when women/girls can access a safe and legal abortion. Under the previous SRH law a woman/girl was legally entitled to access a safe abortion if the pregnancy posed a risk to life/health, when the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest, and when there is a fetal abnormality. Woman and girls under the new SHR amendment can now also access a safe and legal abortion if the pregnancy is likely to worsen or cause a situation of material, educational, professional or moral distress incompatible with their interests.

FIGO position on the issue

A giant leap forward in Benin

The new law is a giant leap forward in addressing unsafe abortions in Benin. Unsafe abortions are a deadly preventable pandemic, and a leading cause of preventable maternal deaths and disability in Benin. FIGO welcomes the new amendment to the SRH law in Benin and recognises the commitment of the Collège National des Gynécologues Obstétriciens du Bénin (CNGOB). We are proud to have supported their work to strengthen advocacy for safe abortion through our [Advocating for Safe Abortion Project](#).

“FIGO, together with our colleagues at CNGOB and partners, welcome the government of Benin's leadership to enact the new Sexual Health Reproduction (SHR) law. FIGO has been supporting the Collège National des Gynécologues Obstétriciens du Bénin (CNGOB) with their work to strengthen advocacy for safe abortion in Benin for a number of years and we are pleased to see this result.

“We will continue to provide our full support to CNGOB in their work with the Benin government to operationalise the new SRH law, to ensure that it brings real change in the lives of women and girls who require safe abortion care, while enabling health care workers to provide time-sensitive abortion care without fear of criminalisation.

“We hope other countries in the West Africa region and beyond will take inspiration from Benin's leadership and leverage this as an opportunity to address the preventable pandemic of unsafe abortions in their own country, with the belief that change is not only possible, but is urgently required.”

– Dr Carlos Füchtner, FIGO President

Continued urgency required to address preventable maternal deaths in Benin

According to the latest available figures from the World Health Organization,¹ Benin's maternal mortality ratio (number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) is 397,² equating to 1,600 preventable maternal deaths in 2017. Under the Sustainable Development Goals, countries have made a commitment to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio (MMR) to 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030 and with no country having an MMR greater than 140 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.³ With just under nine years left to achieve the SDGs targets in Benin, this new law is urgently needed.

"The Collège National des Gynécologues Obstétriciens du Bénin (CNGOB), together with our partners, are proud that our government has considered our clinical evidence and our first-hand insights to address the impact of unsafe abortions – a leading cause of maternal deaths and disability in Benin. This new legally binding amendment positions our country at the forefront of nations committed to strengthening women and girl's sexual reproductive health care.

"CNGOB will continue to work with the government and our partners to strengthen awareness and implementation of the new SHR law. As health care workers we see first-hand the devastating suffering that women and girls and their families in our country experience when they cannot access safe abortion and are forced to seek unsafe abortion services. We also know that this suffering is completely avoidable if women and girls have access to the safe abortion care they desperately need."

– **Dr Emmanuel Ewanignon, CNGOB Vice-President**

CNGOB will continue to work with its partners for the full implementation of the new SRH law.

"The Association Béninoise pour la Promotion de la Famille (ABPF) thanks civil society organisations that contributed alongside us and CNGOB to achieve this victory. We now have a stronger platform to spread awareness, education and advocacy to ensure that Benin respects its human rights obligations to the general population, and specifically to women and girls.

"This new law affirms the rights of a marginalised population whose rights to reproductive health (includes safe abortion care) were previously restricted under the 2003 SRH law. Women and girls now have the legal right, under national law, in addition to international human rights laws and standards, to make decisions and access services regarding their bodily autonomy. We will continue to work with the network of parliamentarians, the CNGOB and other national partners with whom we work to popularise and operationalise this law; both for women and girls who need safe abortion care and for health care providers who provide safe abortion care."

– **Mme Judith Gbehinto, ABPF President**

Global need for safe abortion and abortion care

FIGO regards sexual and reproductive health and rights, including access to safe abortion services, to be a basic and non-negotiable human right of every woman and girl in the world. This includes the right of individuals to control and decide on matters of their own sexuality and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination and violence. This means women and girls should be free to decide if or when to have children, and how they will access the means to exercise this right.

FIGO reiterates that the right to safe abortion and abortion care, management and timely provision of non-judgemental service is an integral part of sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, reproductive justice and universal access to health care.

When women and girls do not have access to safe abortion, they may be forced to seek untrained providers, who often use unsafe methods and operate in unsanitary environments. Lack of access to safe abortion results in 45% of all abortions globally being unsafe, in turn accounting for approximately 13% of maternal deaths worldwide. The risk of dying from an unsafe abortion is highest in Africa. FIGO aims to reduce unsafe abortion and the mortality and disability associated with it, and is committed to this work.

FIGO commitments

FIGO will support health care professionals and partners in Benin and elsewhere to facilitate the provision of safe abortion services, including by:

- supporting the engagement of all health care professionals and contributing to advocacy and education on abortion-related issues
- encouraging the development and access of comprehensive abortion care, management and timely non-judgmental services
- providing any required technical expertise to ministries of health and their partners in implementing legislation
- continuing advocacy and awareness-raising about safe abortion in Benin and around the globe.

References

1. WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division. *Maternal mortality in 2000-2017: Internationally comparable MMR estimates by the Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-Agency Group*. Available from: https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/gho-documents/maternal-health-countries/maternal_health_ben_en.pdf
2. UNICEF. *Maternal mortality declined by 38 per cent between 2000 and 2017*. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/maternal-mortality/>
3. Maternal Health Task Force. *The Sustainable Development Goals and Maternal Mortality*. Available from: www.mhtf.org/topics/the-sustainable-development-goals-and-maternal-mortality

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.

About the language we use

Within our documents, we often use the terms 'woman', 'girl' and 'women and girls'. We recognise that not all people who require access to gynaecological and obstetric services identify as a woman or girl. All individuals, regardless of gender identity, must be provided with access to appropriate, inclusive and sensitive services and care.

We also use the term 'family'. When we do, we are referring to a recognised group (perhaps joined by blood, marriage, partnership, cohabitation or adoption) that forms an emotional connection and serves as a unit of society.

FIGO acknowledges that some of the language we use is not naturally inclusive. We are undertaking a thorough review of the words and phrases we use to describe people, health, wellbeing and rights, to demonstrate our commitment to developing and delivering inclusive policies, programmes and services.

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