

ADVOCACY FOR SAFE ABORTION: GYNAECOLOGISTS AND OBSTETRICIANS FOR CHANGE

Executive Summary

Since April 2019, the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) has worked with ten national societies of obstetrics and gynaecology to become key actors in safe abortion advocacy and national leaders in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for women. The advocacy for safe abortion (ASA) project envisioned reaching its objective through five pathways of change, the first to strengthen the society as a whole and the latter to advocate for improving safe abortion care. Based on these pathways, national societies developed their own country- and society-specific action plans based on local contexts and priorities.

1. The ASA project strengthened societies' organisational structures, enabling improved leadership in safe abortion advocacy

- Safe abortion advocacy needs strong organisational structures and supportive leadership. An evaluation conducted by KIT royal tropical institute in 2022 demonstrated that the project contributed to improved advocacy capacities, strengthened management and improved operations in all ten involved societies.
- Societies' internal and external communications improved, including on safe abortion, and eight societies worked on developing a formal position statement on abortion.
- The strengthening of societies, the increased number of activities, and the presence in the field and in the public domain resulted in increased visibility of national societies, including visibility to ministries of health, as reproductive health experts.

2. Societies strengthened partnerships with a diversity of partners to collectively advocate safe abortion

- Diversity and complementarity of partners were found to be key in advocating networks. Common partners of the societies were: legal partners and human rights experts, non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies, ministries, policymakers, journalists, medical schools, other medical or health professional associations, youth groups and student associations.
- The evaluation demonstrated that societies of obstetricians and gynaecologists have the respected authority and the ability to provide the evidence and technical input that strengthen advocacy efforts. They have a strong ability to engage with the policy level, such as with the ministry of health. In at least seven of the countries, outcomes harvested demonstrated action or change within ministries (especially ministries of health) or other governing bodies at the national or subnational level.

3. The work of national societies contributed to improved perceptions on abortion among a wide variety of stakeholders, especially health care workers

- In all countries, societies observed positive changes in professional perceptions or attitudes (e.g. acceptance and openness) towards safe abortion among health care workers, including obstetricians-gynaecologists, residents, midwives, general practitioners, nurses, clinical officers, community health volunteers and pharmacists, depending on the various contexts. Society members expressed feeling more confident and better equipped to engage in dialogue on safe abortion.
- A broad variety of (social) public actors were targeted to improve perceptions on abortion, including the media, religious leaders, the youth, traditional or community leaders, traditional healers, universities and the ministry of health. Those context-specific critical actors showed increased awareness or changed perceptions towards safe abortion, and their involvement was also often identified as a means to further facilitate perception change towards abortion.

4. Improved clarity on and improved implementation of legal frameworks was an essential step towards improved perceptions and provision of services

- In all countries, involved society members and health workers expressed feeling better informed about the legal framework for abortion. Other key actors such as media and legal professionals, and the ministry of health also expressed an increased understanding of the legal framework and subsequently a change in perception towards safe abortion.
- Various societies in collaboration with partners took action (and in certain countries achieved results) in relation to the improvement or harmonisation of guidelines, policy or laws to improve the implementation of the legal framework. In two countries (Benin and Côte d'Ivoire), there have been revisions of the law or penal code, broadening the conditions allowed for safe abortion.

5. The ASA project contributed to generating new evidence on safe abortion and strengthening of routine data collection systems

- In all countries, critical first steps have been taken towards generating evidence on safe abortion through initiating new studies. A total of 31 research products were developed, in the form of protocols or studies conducted on safe abortion with a focus on context-relevant issues. The studies resulted, for example, in the development of reports, policy papers and scientific paper submissions and publications.
- In some countries, actions have taken place on the establishment and strengthening of routine data collection systems and procedures. The evidence generated through the project has started to be used to advocate for safe abortion and its use will continue.

Through working locally, FIGO brings the health providers voice globally

FIGO, as a technical expert organisation and global network of societies in obstetrics and gynaecology, is in a good position to leverage training, resources and support for advocacy at the local levels and to facilitate global learning, including cross-country learning and support between national societies. In addition, FIGO supported the project societies in specific advocacy activities such as communications on country developments via blogs, and supporting meetings with partners in response to United Nations treaty monitoring bodies. Vice versa, the in-country work and lessons gave FIGO first-hand experience and the ability to amplify national evidence and voices at the international level. FIGO developed various outputs to support international and national advocacy of safe abortion, including statements, webinars, blogs and evidence briefs. The project did not only strengthen local advocacy, but also amplified the health professionals' voice globally.

Achievements in country

In total over 200 outcomes as a result of societies' advocacy activities were harvested by country implementation teams and substantiated during the final evaluation. The main outcome areas that generated results were those of creating improved perceptions and strengthening networks. The figure below demonstrates some examples of key outcomes per country.

Sociedad Panameña de Obstetricia y Ginecología (SPOG)

Public hospitals in 8 regions of Panama adopted the Perinatal Information System (SIP) Web Plus and The Ministry of Health (MINSAL) and Social Security Fund (CSS) approved integrated platforms for the use of SIP Web Plus to obtain consolidated perinatal and abortion data. SPOG played a key role in creating a conducive environment to promote and apply this change, and facilitated the approval and integration of this system in both the MINSAL and the CSS.

Sociedad Peruana de Obstetricia y Ginecología (SPOG)

The Postgraduate Unit of the Faculty of Medicine of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos approved the proposal presented by SPOG to develop a Postgraduate Course in the Faculty of Medicine on Sexual Health and Reproductive Health. The course, first held in December 2021 includes the topics of abortion, a public health problem and therapeutic abortion and is planned to repeat every year to obstetrics-gynaecology residents in their first year.

Société de Gynécologie et d'Obstétrique de Côte d'Ivoire (SOGOCI)

SOGOCI has extended its coverage to the national territory with the establishment and operation of 16 sections, each with a designated focal point, covering the 33 health regions of the country. As a result the number of members who have joined SOGOCI have increased (1,343 members of new sections) and new links with hospitals and regional players have been established, enhancing their reach in advocacy.

Collège National des Gynécologues et Obstétriciens du Bénin (CNGOB)

In October 2021, a new sexual and reproductive health law was passed, modifying and supplementing the sexual and reproductive rights law of 2003–2004, which extended the conditions of access to safe abortion care. CNGOB worked in strong alliances to strengthen advocacy arguments and changing perceptions to deputies responsible for voting on the law and had several sessions, on invitation by the president, with the parliament's Law Commission.

Société Malienne de Gynécologie Obstétrique (SOMAGO)

Members of SOMAGO and other key stakeholders started to change their perceptions in relation to safe abortion following the successful engagement of an Imam that was able to provide a religious perspective on the topic of safe abortion during various sessions and trainings.

Society of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians of Cameroon (SOGOC)

The Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Family and the Ministry of Justice have become part of and are actively engaged in the Advocacy for Comprehensive Abortion Care network created by SOGOC as part of the project. Collectively, the network and all its stakeholders including the MoH, developed referral pathways for rape victims (including minors), and SOGOC has presented an evidence informed policy brief on improving access to safe abortion for eligible cases towards the Ministry of Health.

Association of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Uganda (AOGU)

Following the Values Clarification and Attitude Transformation training of health workers, sensitisation meetings with community leaders and community dialogues by AOGU, health workers demonstrated shifted attitudes towards women with the need for an abortion and were more willing to provide comprehensive abortion care. Two communities that took part in community dialogues encouraged girls to go back to school after pregnancy and abortion.

Kenya Obstetrical Gynaecological Society (KOGS)

The prevention of unsafe abortion and women's rights were discussed during household visits in Kajiado, following the training of community health volunteers by KOGS. Community members felt better informed about the dangers of unsafe abortion, the legal framework of Kenya on abortion and the availability of PAC services.

Zambia Association of Gynaecologists & Obstetricians (ZAGO)

ZAGO strengthened collaboration with youth, media and chiefs and supported these groups to take leadership in advocating safe abortion, widening ZAGO's reach. Youth groups in various provinces started to carry out activities to support the advocacy for safe services and chiefs began to raise awareness in their communities.

Associação Moçambicana de Obstetras e Ginecologistas (AMOG)

AMOG has consistently worked with MoH and in particular supported the MoH to conduct the National Seminar on Values Clarification regarding safe abortion (December 2020) and the validation and publication of Ethical Guidelines in Gynecology and Obstetrics which guided the trainings across the country. AMOG led and coordinated the development of the Ethical guidelines with the technical working group on safe abortion to MoH alongside various partnering organisations.

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