Tragically Lacking: Safe Abortion Care in Humanitarian Emergencies

Sandra Krause
Women’s Refugee Commission
Fig. 1. Trend of global displacement & proportion displaced | 1996 - 2015 (end-year)

UNHCR Global Trends 2015
Humanitarian crises disproportionately impact women and adolescent girls.
The majority of preventable deaths in women and children under 5 will occur in areas affected by crises.
Comprehensive abortion services are particularly important in humanitarian contexts.
• Assessment found no mention of safe abortion in humanitarian proposals

• Safe abortion not available in assessed facilities in South Sudan, DRC or Burkina Faso

• Lit review found no published evaluations of safe abortion care in humanitarian settings

• Limited institutional capacity and attention to safe abortion care
Why don’t humanitarian organizations provide safe abortion services?

• There is no need
• Abortion is too complicated to provide in crises
• Donors don’t fund abortion services
• Abortion is illegal in these settings
“There is no need”

• Collapse of health systems in humanitarian crises means reduced access to:
  o Emergency obstetric care
  o Family planning
  o Post-abortion care

• Sexual violence is associated with war
  o When rape results in pregnancy, negative outcomes may be exacerbated
“Abortion is too complicated”

• MVA and medication abortion can be used at the “health center” level by mid-level providers

• MVA and misoprostol available in specific RH kits (not mifepristone, however)
“Donors don’t fund it.”

- Helms Amendment, 1973, most often interpreted (incorrectly) to
  - restrict all information, education, services and referral for abortion
  - apply to all US foreign aid
  - apply to all recipients
  - apply to all countries regardless of national policy
  - make no exception for women’s lives, rape or incest
  - **BUT: Does not apply to organizations’ other funds**

- Mexico City clauses (Global Gag Rule)
  - only applied to non-US NGOs (*not* US NGOs, foreign governments, multilaterals)
  - only applied to USG family planning funds (*not* any other US funding)
  - applied to all funds of the affected NGOs, even non-US funds
  - makes exceptions for saving women’s lives, rape and incest
  - **not in effect now**
“It’s ‘illegal.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safe abortion permitted</th>
<th>Woman’s life</th>
<th>Physical health</th>
<th>Mental health</th>
<th>Rape or incest</th>
<th>Fetal impair</th>
<th>Econ/social</th>
<th>On request</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of countries</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 6 countries ban abortion entirely: Chile, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Malta, Nicaragua and the Vatican
“It’s illegal.”

International agreements supporting access to safe abortion care:

- **Geneva Convention Article 3**: Denial of safe abortion to a rape survivor can be considered in violation of her rights.

- **UN Security Council Resolution 2106**: Supports access to complete RH services, including safe abortion for rape survivors.

- **Maputo protocol**: Countries that ratified it (36) must authorize safe abortion in cases of rape/incest and to protect the mental health, physical health and life of the woman.
Why don’t we provide safe abortion to women in humanitarian settings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There’s no need.</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s “illegal.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s too complicated to provide in crisis.</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donors don’t fund it.</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resources
IAWG Safe Abortion Care Sub-Working Group

- Access to safe abortion for all women and adolescent girls in crisis is a human right.
- Safe abortion care is an evidence-based intervention that prevents maternal mortality and morbidity.
- Access to high-quality safe abortion care for all women and adolescent girls contributes to gender equality and social justice.
- A core package of evidence-based safe abortion services should be made available to displaced women and adolescent girls in all crisis situations.
From Agreement to Action
The need for research is greater than ever

• Operations research, demonstration projects or implementation science to demonstrate that, despite cultural, policy and political barriers, services can be provided and will be utilized.

• Formative research, stronger qualitative and participatory research giving voice to women in need of, able to obtain or denied abortions.

• Research quantifying the extent of unwanted pregnancy, the incidence of abortion, and unsafe abortion-related mortality and morbidity to justify the increased attention and demand for services.